ALFRED

SEPTEMBER 60¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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EW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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September 1970

Dear Reader:

Cook announced dinner one evening recently but I, strangely, allowed it to grow cold. You see, I was reading the manuscript of *Charter Flight* by Jaime Sandaval, which leads off September's lineup of all-new stories. Rare indeed is the opportunity to witness such unscheduled developments, and it annoyed only the cook that the opossum croquettes had meanwhile been ignored.

Among other displays of cunning this month, we have *The Deal* by Clark Howard. With a friend such as he portrays therein, an enemy would be a relief. In Earle N. Lord's *Let Saprophyte Do It*, the populace includes the smallest and the largest germs known to exist, and Frank Sisk's robbing killer is also "bugged," though by woman trouble, in *Blind*.

The Girl in Gold, Jonathan Craig's fine mystery novelette, takes us along with a team of Manhattan homicide detectives investigating an extreme case of littering. But don't overlook the other stories, too numerous to include here. You are holding a superlative month's enjoyment.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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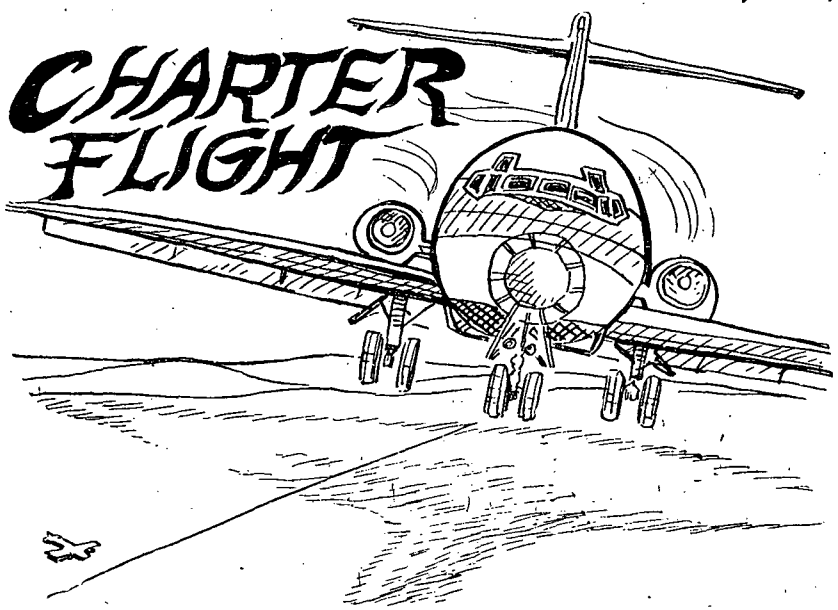
If there is a balm for every pain, as reputed, the long green is said to possess soothing restorative properties.

CHARTER FLIGHT



MY BOSS' NAME is Joe Timmerman. Around the agency he's referred to as "Injun Joe," but not where he can hear it. He has a bronze complexion, a bristling white crew cut, a face like a hatchet, and a temper to match. I'd done a few extra-legal things since joining the Timmerman Security Agency in San Diego two years ago, solely because I was afraid of Joe Timmerman's temper.

Riding herd on industrial espionage is our bag, but every so often we wind up squared off in another corner of the ring. I'd seen the redhead leave Timmerman's office, and I was curious when he called me in. The woman was tall, handsome, and poised, with the glossy patina that comes from unused money in safe-deposit boxes.

Timmerman tossed a slim black wallet on his desk when I closed

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his office door. "There's $75,000 cash in that, Carmody," he said. "Take the next plane to New York and deliver it to a gambler named Tippy Larkin at 125 West Forty-fifth Street. Tell him it's from Goody Twoshoes."

I wrote down the address, picked up the wallet, and verified that the seventy-five bills in it were each for $1000. "The redhead's paying blackmail?" I asked.

Timmerman's expression closed up like a clam out of water. "She's paying a fee plus expenses, and she didn't ask for an estimate of either."

"The mails are still running," I said. "Writing checks hasn't gone out of style. For a beautiful woman to pick up the tab on a round trip here Monday morning." This was Thursday morning. "Tom Carson at Melvindale Electronics, for some strange reason, seems to derive comfort from the sight of your stupidly honest face. We'll talk when you get back about whether your New York time was on or off vacation time."

That's my boss.

I placed the wallet carefully in the inside breast pocket of my jacket. "See you Monday."

"Right." Timmerman was already shuffling through his mail as I left the office.

I signed a chit for the cashier and counted my expense money. There's something about crisp bills that builds the confidence. I went to my desk, took out my shoulder

by Jaime Sandoval

coast-to-coast flight, plus a fee for something that could be handled—"

"You talk too much, Carmody," Timmerman interrupted me. "Hit the road."

It's not the first time I've been told I talk too much.

"At least it gives me the weekend in New York," I said.

Timmerman's glance flicked to his wall calendar. "I want you back

holster and .38 police special, and got into the rig, then caught a cab to the airport and took the first jet flight to New York.

The five-hour trip was uneventful. I rode the airlines bus to the east-side terminal and then took a cab crosstown. With the time differential, it was 7:00 p.m. in New York when I reached my destination. It was a twenty-story office building, and I knew I

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wasn't going to do any business that night.

I told the cabbie to take me to the Hotel Manhattan, made a telephone call to the cute little blonde stewardess on the New York flight, and went out on the town. Most of the spots in which I'd frolicked on my last trip to New York were shuttered, but we found a few new ones.

I arrived back at 125 West Forty-fifth at 11:00 the next morning with large head but no regrets. The first setback occurred when I could find no one by the name of Larkin listed on the office building's wall directory. The building had no doorman, so I approached the elevator starter. "I'm looking for a Tippy Larkin," I said.

He turned around and looked at me. "Multimedia, Inc., fifth floor," he said when he'd completed his inspection. "Turn right."

I turned right when I left the elevator at the fifth floor. The third door on the left had Multimedia, Inc. lettered on its frosted glass. I knocked once and entered. A jowly, white-haired, pink-cheeked, freshly barbered man stood between me and the small desk in the closet-sized office. On the desk were fourteen telephones. "What's the word, cousin?" the pink-cheeked man wanted to know. He had a deep, authoritative-sounding voice.

"I'm looking for Tippy Larkin."

He extended his right hand. "I'm his partner, Duke Conboy."

I took the hand. "Carmody."

Conboy was eyeing me speculatively. "Sam said you looked like a cop who'd changed his mind about it."

"Sam?"

"The elevator operator."

"Oh." Instant liaison; I looked at the lineup of phones and wondered which one was Sam's. "When do you expect Larkin?"

"Tippy is in Vegas where I'll be in—" Duke Conboy consulted his wristwatch, "—eight hours."

Timmerman should have checked Larkin's presence or absence in New York before he sent me, I decided. Then again, Sam's announcement of me might have sent Larkin underground. With the bookmaking setup into which I'd walked here, Larkin could be in an adjoining office sizing me up.

"I have something to deliver to Larkin from Goody Twoshoes," I announced.

"Is that right?" Conboy's voice was more animated. "How is Goody?"

"She's in excellent physical condition," I said truthfully.

"You got anything that says you're from Goody?"

I took a dollar bill out of my pocket and showed it to him. "Sev-

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enty-five thousand of those bills."

"That's the message Tippy's been waitin' to get," Conboy admitted. He was silent for a moment. "Since I'm his partner, you could leave it with me."

"That's not what my orders say," I countered.

"Okay, have it your way. We can cut a corner on this. A few of the boys are flyin' out to Vegas this afternoon on a chartered jet leavin' La Guardia at three p.m. I'll save you a seat which won't cost you nothin', an' you can make the delivery to Tippy tonight."

It's not every day I get the chance to knock down on the price of a jet ticket from New York to Las Vegas. "I'll be there, and thanks for the offer."

"See you at three," Conboy said.

Two of the phones were ringing when I left the office.

Duke Conboy was waiting for me at La Guardia's lower level. "Right on time," he commented from around a frayed cigar stub. He waved at someone behind me. "Glad you could make the excursion, Candy."

I turned to see a smiling man approaching us, wearing a lime-green suit, lime-green suede shoes, and a lime-green derby. His ruffled shirt was shocking pink as was his silk tie.

"Candy Kane," Duke began, then paused. He looked at me. "I don't believe I caught the first name?"

"Monk," I said.

"Candy Kane, Monk Carmody," Duke completed the introduction.

Pleased to meet you, man," the dapper looking Candy said in a British accent. We shook hands.

"Let's go," Duke commanded. He led the way past an unmanned desk where an airlines clerk would ordinarily have been checking passengers against a manifest. We passed through a doorway leading to a carpeted ramp. Six feet along the ramp a fat man in a battered felt hat overflowed both sides of the three-legged stool on which he was sitting. Both ears were cauliflowered, and his brows were lumpy from dozens of post-fight stitches. "This is Monk Carmody, Tim, an' he's with me," Duke said as we edged our way past the stool.

"Right, Duke," the fat man said. He nodded to Candy.

We entered the interior of the Boeing 727 I had seen from the observation window on the level above. A stewardess greeted us pleasantly. She was blonde and a cute trick, although not as cute as my companion of the previous evening. Behind her a hard-eyed man with a gold chain looped across the front of his scarlet weskit stepped

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into the aisle in front of me. Duke Conboy introduced me to Sal Bartucci, and the hard-eyed Sal moved aside.

A subdued hubbub of male voices floated out from the plane's interior to the forward compartment where we were standing. We moved along the aisle, past the galley where I had a quick glimpse of two white-jacketed men juggling ice cubes and pouring drinks.

"That mean-faced little one is sniffing something," Candy's British accent commented from behind me. He was looking into the galley at the two bartenders. "He looks higher than this plane is going to be." Candy sounded amused.

The aisle seats of the usual three-abreast seats had been removed in the tourist section, making a wider-than-usual passageway. Even so, we had to step over and around men who were on their knees with bunched money in their hands. Spinning dice riveted everyone's attention, and among the loose bills on the carpeting twenties and fifties predominated. At intervals along the widened aisle of the plane I could see four separate crap games.

Ahead of me, Duke had to wait for a piece of plywood stretched across the aisle to be removed when a hand of poker was completed. There was no silver on the board, and the smallest bill I saw was a ten. The traffic grew even thicker as we approached the center of the plane. "Tail section's full up, Duke," someone called. "Max is dealin' blackjack." Duke motioned me to slide into the window seat of a pair of empties above the port wing of the plane.

En route we had lost Candy. I looked back along the aisle. The lime-green suit was hunched down at the first crap game. The derby hat was on the floor with a sheaf of bills in its bowl. Candy's face gleamed as he joked with the man beside him while his quick hands scattered bills to cover bets.

"What about Candy's British accent?" I asked Duke as we sat down.

"He flew in from Nassau for this junket," Duke replied as he settled his bulk into the seat. "The guys really flock to these get-togethers. I saw Bottles Lamoreaux from Montreal. How about a drink?"

"Bourbon," I said, raising my voice to be heard. The noise level was fantastic.

Duke bellowed an order for two bourbons to someone I couldn't see. The plane lurched and began to move slowly along the runway. I hadn't even heard the motors pick up tempo.

I looked out the double-paned window along the length of the

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swept-back, tapered wing. The terminal flowed by as sunlight glinted from the wing's smooth metal surface. I swallowed to clear my ears as the cabin pressure increased. The air vent above my head hissed and blew welcome cool, fresh air over my damp face.

The voice of the stewardess sounded over the intercom but the noise in the plane drowned her out. She was standing between the compartments with a professional smile on her pretty face. She persisted until the din diminished enough so she could make herself heard. "We will not take off until everyone is in his seat with seat belt fastened," she warned.

One by one the games broke up and the reluctant gamblers slid into their seats. The stewardess ran through the usual procedure of demonstrating the oxygen mask and pointing out the emergency exits. I noticed a red panel above my window. There was an emergency locking lever recessed behind it. The section of the fuselage next to my window seat was an emergency exit which led out onto the wing's broad surface. I thumped the section with my knuckles. Its solid feel was reassuring. I didn't like to think about its blowing out at 600 mph four miles up.

We reached the end of the runway and waited. Around me, the gamblers loudly protested the delay in getting back to their games. A sleek-looking 707 flashed past my window, its landing wheels searching for the runway. Blue smoke spurted as the motionless tires bit into the abrasive concrete. The plane rose again in a long, graceful bounce. Blowing jets of smoke appeared as the tires settled down a second time. The 707 disappeared behind the tail of our plane.

The quiet hum of our jets picked up volume and we started to move. The plane gained speed so quickly that the acceleration pushed me back firmly into my seat. The horizon tilted to a thirty-degree angle and stayed there as the aircraft's nose lifted and sighted on a piece of sky dotted with white puffs of cloud.

The ground dropped away quickly. Manhattan was far behind by the time we reached the cloud wisps. The island was obscured by a dirty layer of smog. Above us there was nothing but blue space. The plane leveled off and the SEAT BELT light went out. There was the metallic clashing sound of released belts as the gamblers poured into the aisles to resume their interrupted action.

Duke leaned forward in the direction of the eight-handed poker game. "I'll take half anyone's action," he stated.

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"You got half of mine," growled a sallow-faced man with a funereal expression. He counted the bills in his hand. "Thirty-four hundred, Duke."

"I'm in, Toby." Duke removed a wallet from his jacket and counted out seventeen one-hundred-dollar bills. He handed them to the sallow-faced Toby who added the wad to his own roll. Duke grinned at me as he sank back into his seat again. "You don't wanna get Tippy's $75,000 into action?" he asked.

"The only action Tippy's $75,000 is going to get is when it moves from my hand to his," I said. "How come we weren't checked aboard the plane against a manifest?"

Duke winked. "Officially, we were. Probably half John Smiths an' half John Does. Nobody wants any publicity about these gamblin' flights to Vegas."

He returned his attention to the poker game. I watched Toby raise behind the dealer with two pair and make them stand up. The next hand he ran three jacks into a flush and sat there with a brooding look on his jaundiced features.

I turned at a tap on the shoulder. A white-coated bartender was dumping a miniature of bourbon into a glass on his tray, pouring it so clumsily he spilled a third of it. The man's eyes were pinpoints, and I recalled Candy's remark. "Candy thinks that guy is on junk," I said to Duke when the bartender moved away.

Duke looked at the man moving through the congested aisle back to the front of the plane. "Him?" He shrugged. "Could be. Neither of these two are part of the reg'lar crew we usually have on this flight."

"What happened to the stewardess?"

"Up in the cockpit, out of reach of the grabby-handed types."

"How often are these flights run?"

"For the pros, about twice a year. Vegas is gonna get seventy-two hours of hold-your-hat action when this bus hits the ground."

"What's with Goody Twoshoes and the $75,000?" I probed.

"Goody was married to Blueshirt Charlie Andrews," Conboy explained. He peeled the cellophane from a fresh cigar. "Charlie was holdin' the $75,000 for Tippy when Larkin had a little disagreement with the law an' went into the gow. Then Charlie had a heart attack an' died. Two years later Goody married again, this time to the kind of money that's been around for five generations. She's an all-right broad, though. She kept tabs on when Tippy was due

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to hit the street, an' she called me two weeks ago to tell me she was gonna get the $75,000 to him. I tell you that Goody was really a swinger when the ol' Blueshirt first brought her around. I remember once in El Paso—"

"Good afternoon, friends," the loudspeaker came on over our heads. "This is your pilot, Captain Murray, speaking. We are flying at our assigned altitude of thirty-three thousand feet. Weather ahead is clear. Our estimated arrival is 5:12 p.m. Nevada time. Ground temperature is eighty-two degrees. Limousines will be waiting at the airport."

The metallic voice stopped. Duke was again watching the poker game. Up the aisle I could see Sal Bartucci's red weskit clashing with Candy's lime-green ensemble as money changed hands furiously in the largest crap game.

I dozed off despite the noise around me. I woke a couple of times and glanced out the window. The ground had changed from the green-and-black agricultural squares to rocky, gray-brown, desolate-looking terrain with few signs of habitation.

Once when I woke, Duke was looking at me speculatively. "You still look like a cop, cousin," he said.

"I was until I worked out on the mayor's cousin one night," I said.

Duke seemed to feel that covered the subject adequately.

It was the loudspeaker that woke me from my next catnap. "—as I say!" a harsh voice said. There was a thudding noise, followed by a gurgling sound. "You—you knifed him!" a girl's voice said tremulously. I sat up and blinked. Was that what I'd really heard? "Fly it in there!" the harsh voice resumed. "And get away from that button or I'll—" The voice cut out.

Duke Conboy was staring up at the loudspeaker curiously. No one in the aisle was paying any attention. Duke glanced at me. "Thought I heard somethin' about a knife."

"I heard it, too."

"They got a movie goin' in the cockpit?" He looked at his watch. "Only twenty minutes to go. It must've been somethin' about the landin' instructions. Yeah, there we go now."

The steady rumble of the engines eased off. A squeal of rushing fluid through the hydraulic lines was followed by a series of vibrations. The trailing edge of the wing dropped away as the flaps began to lower. "Wonder why they didn't tell us to put our seat belts back on?" Duke speculated.

Heavier vibrations shook the plane. Thumping sounds indicated

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that the landing gear had been extended. The back of my seat pushed me forward as the plane nosed down and began a rapid descent. I could see the barren ground rising.

The plane banked steeply as it rushed toward the ground. A black macadam landing strip moved backward under the trailing edge of the wing. From our height it looked no larger than a burnt matchstick, but it grew rapidly in size as we descended in a sweeping turn.

As the plane continued its turn I could see only a single runway. A couple of miles beyond the wing tip I could make out a small town bisected by a ribbon of straight concrete highway that appeared to come from nowhere and lead off across the desert to nowhere.

The engines came on strong again and the plane leveled out. We were so low I could see thin shadows cast by stubby mesquite dotting the arid-looking ground bordering the runway. The pilot banked again, grinding down more flaps. I had another glimpse of the runway as the wing dipped. It looked terribly short. At its near end was a small private plane, its twin propellers sending flashes of reflected sunlight from its spinning blades. I'd missed seeing it before because its dune-yellow color blended it into the parched landscape. The plane was the only sign of life I'd seen.

I turned to Duke. "Doesn't Vegas have a complex of airstrips? I can't see—"

There was a loud bang, and we were on the ground. A cloud of brown dust and sand came up over the forward edge of the wing. He's missed the runway, I decided. I fended myself off the back of the seat ahead of me with my hands. Then the engines burst into a crescendo of noise and we lifted. I thought the pilot had decided to go around again, but we hit macadam with a jolt more severe than the first one. From the corner of my eye I saw Duke Conboy carom off the back of the seat ahead of him and collapse limply.

I realized that the pilot had reversed the engine thrust and was applying full power to slow us down. Shouts, yells, and curses filled our section of the plane as the unprepared gamblers were flung in all directions. There was a loud, explosive noise beneath the aircraft. A circular metallic object flew off to one side and spun away. Trailing it was a black tubular ring. It took me a second to realize it was a tire blasted from the landing gear when its retaining rim tore loose from the shock of the hard landing.

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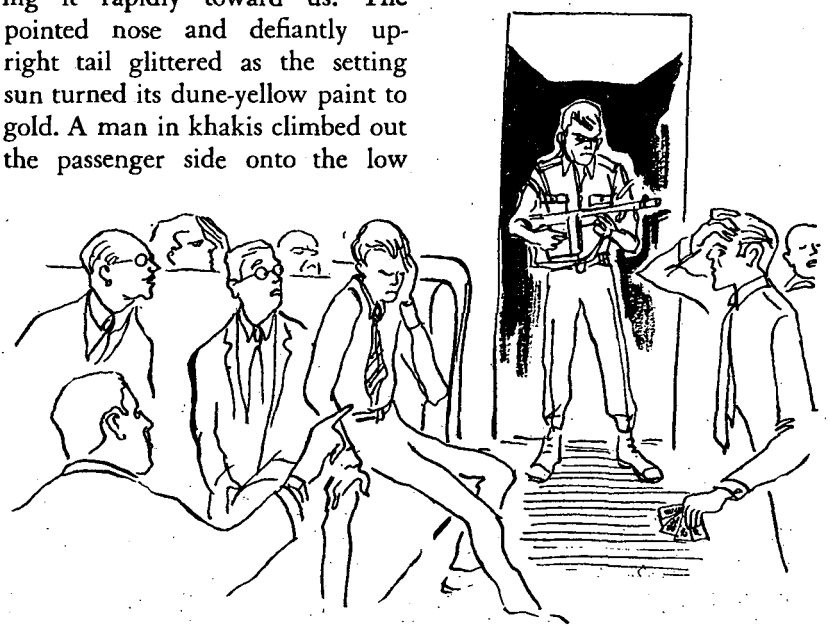
I could feel the brakes being applied in quick jabs as the deep-throated engines slowed the plane. "What the hell's *happened*?" someone screamed. The brakes went on again as the jets kept working at full pitch. The plane veered sharply to the right, left the macadam and bounced over sandy soil, sounding as though it were breaking to pieces. It swerved left onto the macadam again, ground-looped, and came to a stop with a long shudder, cocked sideways.

Jammed against the window, I found myself staring up the airstrip in the direction of the private plane whose glinting propellors were taxiing it rapidly toward us. The pointed nose and defiantly upright tail glittered as the setting sun turned its dune-yellow paint to gold. A man in khakis climbed out the passenger side onto the low wing, then jumped down to the ground. Slung across his shoulder was a machine gun. He ran across the airstrip toward the rear of our plane and disappeared from my view.

There was dead silence inside the plane for a moment, then a babble of voices as the gamblers dragged themselves to their feet, holding onto various parts of bruised anatomies. I could see one man motionless in the aisle. Beside me, Duke Conboy stirred but did not regain consciousness.



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The sallow-faced Toby looked livid as he stood by his seat with cards still clutched in his hand. He said hoarsely, "What d'you suppose—"

"Everyone into his seat!" a harsh male voice rasped over the loudspeaker. "We mean business! There's a machine gun trained on you from the rear of the plane!"

A rat-a-tat-tat burst of machine-gun fire punctuated the words. I hunched my neck instinctively. Someone had opened the emergency exit in the rear of the plane, and the man with the machine gun had climbed the lowered ladder and placed himself in charge.

The sound of the machine-gun bullets ripping into the plane's ceiling had sent those gamblers who could move diving into their seats. Down the aisle at a run from the rear of the plane came the white-coated bartender with the pinpoint eye pupils. He had opened the emergency doors, and this situation could only be a hijack.

"We are coming through the plane!" the loudspeaker blared.

From my window seat I couldn't see the front compartment around the bulge of the galley. The poker-playing Toby was peering up the aisle in the direction in which the bartender had disappeared.

"There's another machine gun in the cockpit which will cover our movement along the aisle!" the metallic voice on the loudspeaker continued. "Empty all pockets of money and weapons into this canvas sack!"

"It's the other bartender," Toby said in a strangled voice. "He's holdin' a gun on the pilot an' stewardess. The little one is with him an'—" Toby gulped, "—he's got a wicked-lookin' knife. They're startin'—"

"Just to show you we mean business!" the loudspeaker roared.

A murmured ripple of sound ran from front to back of the aircraft.

"—cut the pilot's throat!" a voice said hoarsely.

"—almos' took his head off!"

"That's what happens to the girl if there's any interference!" the loudspeaker rasped. "Empty all pockets! Stand up as you're approached and *empty all pockets!*"

Another burst from the machine gun in the rear of the plane caused everyone to flinch. I couldn't tell if it was intimidation or if someone had made a move toward a weapon. Silence followed, a silence so profound I could hear heavy breathing all around me. Duke Conboy had partially regained consciousness and was blinking dazedly.

I watched the aisle. I don't know how long it was before the stewardess came into view. Her head

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was tilted upward by a white-coated arm under her chin, exposing the whole of her slender throat to the red-stained, double-bladed knife pressed against it by the beady-eyed bartender. The girl's eyes were enormous.

Right behind the slow-moving pair and keeping in unison with them was the second bartender. "Turn out those pockets!" he kept chanting. "I want to see the lining of the pockets! Turn them out!"

The group paused beside each seat while cursing, snarling gamblers emptied their pockets into a large canvas sack. I saw knives and guns disappearing into the sack along with wallets and handfuls of green bills. The progress along the aisle was unhurried and ballet-like in its precision. The two men remained back-to-back, with the girl out in front of them. The bloody knife at the girl's throat never wavered.

Duke wobbled to his feet and threw his wallet into the sack. He pulled out his pockets so the linings showed. The sack was thrust toward me. I tossed Tippy Larkin's $75,000 and my own wallet into the sack, then sat down again with a brassy taste in my throat. I had a picture of myself trying to explain to Joe Timmerman what had happened to the money.

The ballet moved into the rear compartment of the plane. Men leaned out into the aisles to watch as the procession passed out of my sight.

"The goons'll do better 'n a quarter million on this job!" the sallow-faced Toby exclaimed huskily.

It struck me that while the machine-gunner at the rear of the plane was a reality, the supposed one in the cockpit was a bluff. Machine gun or not, no one could expect to walk down that aisle alone among sixty infuriated gamblers without a hostage like the young stewardess and hope to make the rear exit alive. I was positive there was no machine-gunner up front.

I looked up at the emergency exit handle on the wall panel beside me and had just reached for it when a choked feminine scream brought a hush into the babble around me. "He's killed the girl!" someone shouted from the rear compartment.

A burst of machine-gun fire drove men who had started out into the aisle back into their seats. I pulled down the emergency exit handle at the top, grabbed the top and bottom of the window section, lifted the panel in and dropped it into Duke's lap, then crawled out the opening onto the wing. A blast of desert air enveloped me.

In the bright sunlight I felt as

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conspicuous as a fly in a bowl of milk. I drew my .38 and scrambled on hands and knees farther out on the metal wing so I could see around the tail assemblage of our 707. The private plane was turning in a short arc, heading back up the runway.

I stopped when I could see the emergency exit ladder extending from the 707's tail section to the ground. The white-coated bartender who had held the knife at the girl's throat was two-thirds of the way down the ladder. I leaned over the edge of the wing and fired at him three times. He flew sideways off the ladder, hit hard, tried to get up, fell back, and tried again. He didn't make it but I could see him still struggling.

The man with the canvas sack started down the ladder. Its bulk concealed nearly all of his body. He went down the narrow rungs as surefootedly as a cockroach down a wall. I snapped off a shot at his fast-moving feet, but nothing happened. The man with the sack yelled something to the khaki-clad machine-gunner who had backed out onto the ladder, and he thrust his weapon between the ladder rungs and fired off a burst in my direction. He couldn't aim, but I could hear the slugs chewing up the wing.

It changed my priorities. The man with the sack hit the ground and darted under the plane's belly, keeping it between himself and me. I had to let him go. If the machine-gunner reached the ground and lined up on me, I had no more chance than a cobra against a mongoose.

I fired at the machine-gunner. I saw him straighten up. He lost his grip on his armament which fell to the macadam. The man clung to the ladder for an instant, then fell straight down on top of his gun. He didn't move.

The man with the sack had almost reached the private plane. I crossed my right hand holding the .38 over my left wrist and squeezed off my last shot. At that range it was like hoping to complete a hundred-yard forward pass, but he clutched at his side, staggered, and fell. The private plane's engines died for a moment, as if the pilot debated coming to the rescue. Then the engines roared and the plane raced down the runway and took off.

All of a sudden the dry, dusty desert was quiet except for the diminishing whine of the departing plane. I holstered my gun, grabbed the edge of the wing in both hands, lowered myself, and dropped. The shock when I landed jarred me right up to the top of my skull, but I straightened up and

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ran through the loose sand to the emergency exit ladder.

Gamblers were pouring down the ladder. Someone had dragged the body of the machine-gunner to one side. The green-suited Candy and the red-weskited Sal were kneeling beside the white-coated bartender who had held the knife at the girl's throat. The blood-stained knife was still in his hand, and he slashed at them with it.

Sal kicked the knife out of his hand, then picked it up. "You got to cut up girls, you louse?" he snarled.

On his back in the sand, the man spat up at them contemptuously. The pupils of his eyes looked like pinholes. Sal leaned over him and his arm rose and fell in whipping motions as he lashed the man's face with his own knife. A purple mist and then gouts of blood jetted from gaping slits. Candy snatched the knife from Sal and cross-hatched the slits. The man still spat at them from what was left of his ruined face.

Duke Conboy clumped heavily down the ladder. "The girl's dead," he said tonelessly. "The whole crew's dead." He had a lump on his forehead and his face was white but the usual resonance was back in his authoritative voice.

Two gamblers dragged the last man I'd shot into the widening circle of standing men. Another gambler dragged the sack. Men lunged for it.

"Leave the cash alone," Duke ordered.

Rummaging hands emerged from the sack with knives and razors. Half a dozen men surrounded the white-coated bartender with the widening red stain at the waist of his jacket. The man's face was glistening with perspiration.

"Turn loose of him!" Sal Bartucci barked to the men holding the arms of the wet-faced man whose eyes rolled wildly.

They turned him loose and he tried to run. The pitiless circle around him closed like a tulip at nightfall, and the knives and razors cut him down to the ground. He rolled on the sand, screaming.

Candy dragged the canvas sack to one side. "You split it up, Duke," he said.

"All right," Duke agreed. "Dump it out."

Wallets, guns, knives, and hundreds of loose bills spilled out on the sand.

"Wallets first," Duke decreed. "Speak up an' identify 'em."

One by one the gamblers stepped forward. When Duke was satisfied with the identification, he handed over the wallet. It took a surprisingly short time. I had no

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trouble picking out my own wallet and the one containing Goody Twoshoes' $75,000.

"Now the cash," Duke said. "It was movin' around fast, an' nobody knows for sure what he was holdin', so keep your guesses down. Tom?"

"I reckon fourteen thousand," a swarthy man said.

Duke counted it out. "Albie?"

"I'll settle for sixty-eight hundred."

"Whistler?"

"A little better 'n a hundred grand, Duke." The bald-headed speaker sounded almost apologetic.

"Settle for a hundred?"

"You know it," Whistler said fervently.

When the last gambler stepped back into the semicircle of standing men, there was still a tangled pile of money on the sand. "I was holdin' fifty-five thousand," Duke announced.

Candy Kane dropped to his knees and stacked bills, counting aloud. Incredibly, when he handed them to Duke, there was still money on the ground. Candy stacked it, this time without counting.

Sal Bartucci stepped forward when Candy had the money picked up. He dropped a hand on my shoulder. "Maybe all of you didn't see it, but there wouldn't have been no divvyin' up just now if it hadn't been for this guy. So I say he gets the rest of it."

"Hell, I say we each add a bill to it," Whistler said.

"Best suggestion I heard today," someone in the crowd added.

One by one the gamblers filed by me and added a bill apiece to the money Candy had handed me. I was holding green stuff in both hands, and the denominations were not small.

"Okay," the sallow-faced Toby said briskly when the file of men had passed by me. "We bury these three now, Duke?" His glance took in the hijackers on the sand, two breathing, one not.

"No," Duke said. "We're not gonna make it out of here. We saw just one little town on the way in, an' desert on both sides of it. Somebody must have reported a big plane like this comin' down on this little runway. If we try to make it to the town or to the highway where we can flag down a few cars, the law will scoop us for sure. There's too many of us to scatter."

"So?" someone said.

"So we'll bring the law to us," Duke said calmly.

"Hell, no!" a man in the back of the crowd exclaimed. "We'd be sittin' ducks!"

"I ride with Duke," Sal said positively.

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"Me, too," Toby chimed in then.

"Anyone sure what direction the town's in?" Duke continued as if nobody had spoken. Half a dozen hands pointed, including mine. "Okay. Tom, you an' Red are younger than the rest of us. Hoof it to town an' get to a phone. Don't answer no questions if you meet anyone headin' this way. Find out where you are, then phone Marty Caitlin an' tell him how to get here. Tell him—"

"Caitlin the Vegas lawyer for the El Rancho?"

"Right. Tell him what happened, but make sure he's on a private line before you do. Have him bring the sheriff back here with him. Got it?"

"Got it," the swarthy Tom said. He looked at the freckle-faced Red. "Bet you a thousand I beat you into town."

"Like you're faded, man," Red announced.

The two men started across the loose sand at a fast walk.

We sat on the warm sand in the shade of the wing, with a hot wind in our faces. "Where d'you think we are?" someone asked.

"It's got to be within fifty miles of Vegas," Duke said. "Those hijackin' jokers waited until the last minute almost, so the plane's deviation from the flight pattern wouldn't be noticed on control tower radar screens. We couldn't have been too far off course because we were close to our scheduled landin' time. Wonder what they did with the reg'lar bartenders so they could take their places on the plane? Pretty cute."

"I doubt they think so now," Toby said drily.

No one spoke for a while. The only sounds came from the two figures still in the sunlight; sounds that hurt the ears; sickening sounds.

"I could put a stop to that," someone said uneasily.

"Did you see the girl with her throat cut?" Sal demanded savagely.

No one answered. No one made a move to stop the sounds. In another half hour they stopped by themselves.

"Cars," someone said softly when the wing's shadow had lengthened appreciably in the slanting sunlight.

Two tan-colored cruisers trailed dust clouds across the barren expanse of seared earth. Behind them was a black limousine. "Nobody talks unless Caitlin gives the word," Duke warned, rising to his feet.

Deputies swarmed out of the cruisers. Some hovered over the bodies, others ran up the ladder into the plane. Two took up sta-

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tions at opposite ends of the long line of men standing in the shadow of the plane's wing. Two men in dark business suits climbed out of the limousine. The older man walked up to Duke and they shook hands. "Glad to see you, Marty," Duke said.

A bull-necked deputy climbed down from the plane via the rear exit ladder and stalked over to our group. "Let's hear it," he growled to no one in particular.

"I think it's self-evident, Tomlinson," Marty Caitlin said smoothly. "The plane was hijacked, and the passengers—ah—retaliated. It's not the image we wish to promote in the state of Nevada, and I'll ask Mr. Harris, who is close to the governor's office, to say a few words to you on that subject."

"There will be no report made of a hijack," the man who accompanied Caitlin said. He had a flat but emphatic voice with traces of a New England accent. "The deaths of the flight crew will be reported as resulting from a plane crash. The other bodies—" he waved a hand at the sand behind him, "—will be disposed of inconspicuously and will not be reported. Have I made myself clear, Deputy Tomlinson?"

"Yes, sir."

Harris raised his voice. "Did you hear me, you other men?"

"Yes, sir," a ragged chorus replied.

"Good. Call a bus to take these passengers to their destination."

The bus arrived in an hour.

It hadn't even cleared the abandoned airstrip before crap games were going in the aisle.

I delivered Goody Twoshoes' $75,000 to Tippy Larkin that night and felt almost guilty when he pressed a bill into my hand.

On the flight to Los Angeles, where I would catch my connecting flight to San Diego, I mentally composed my report to Joe Timmerman. It would be notable mostly for its omissions.

It was pleasant to reflect that even a blind pig gets an acorn once in a while, and that for once in his life Monk Carmody hadn't been standing around with a fork in his hand when it was raining soup.

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A deal is a deal to a friend of long standing.

by Clark Howard

THE NEW ORLEANS chief of detectives looked at the identification of the man and woman sitting in front of his desk.

"Detective Sam Luna," he said, half to himself, "and Policewoman Katherine Farr." He looked at the woman's deep red hair. "I'll bet they call you Kate."

She smiled. "When I let them."

The chief of detectives was fifty-three, slightly overweight, and Irish. He had not stopped appreciating women with good figures, and if they were Irish also and had red hair, so much the better. He winked at Kate Farr and turned his attention to Sam Luna.

"What did you do to rate getting sent on a thousand-mile trip with a looker like this?"

Luna shrugged. "I guess I just live right."

"You must." He passed their badge cases back to them. "Okay, let's see your court order and the extradition papers."

Luna handed him a large manila envelope. The chief examined the documents it contained, then flipped a switch on his intercom.

"Yes, sir?" said a woman's voice.

"Buzz the jail and have them get Beverly McCall ready to travel,

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will you please." He looked over at Luna again. "How soon do you want her?"

"We have reservations on the two o'clock train."

The chief nodded and turned back to the intercom. "Tell them to

have her ready in time to make the afternoon train to Chicago."

"Yes, Chief."

The chief flipped the intercom switch back and uncapped an old-fashioned fountain pen. He began filling out a release form. "What was the name of her boyfriend again?" he asked. "The one that hijacked the armored truck—"

"Eddie Casey," said Luna.

"Yeah, Eddie Casey. You already caught up with him, didn't you?"

Luna nodded. "He didn't even get out of the city. Matter of fact, he didn't even *try*. He sent the girl out with all of the money and he holed up."

"How'd you find him?"

"Informant. He tried to shoot his way out, but he didn't have much luck."

"And the money?"

Luna shrugged. "Still missing. Maybe the girl will tell us where it is."

The chief frowned. "I wouldn't count on it."

"She might soften up a little," said Luna, "when she's in court facing a ten-year sentence as an accessory before and after. That sort of thing has a tendency to make people stop and think."

"Hope you're right." The chief took a form from his desk and began filling in the blanks. "How much money is involved?"

"Quarter of a million."

"Well, that's a nice little bundle," the chief commented. "I'll bet Miss McCall isn't very popular with the armored truck line's insurance company."

"She's not too popular with the two guys who helped Eddie Casey on the hijacking, either. They didn't get their cuts."

The chief grunted. "So. The plot thickens. They after her?"

Luna nodded. "I would imagine,

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yeah. I might even guarantee it."

The chief completed the form and pushed it across the desk. "This says you received the prisoner in good health and so on and so forth. Sign the bottom line."

Luna signed.

"Now you, Kate, please . . ."

Kate Farr put her name under Luna's. As she wrote, the chief admired the slope of her neck and the cut of her shoulders.

"How'd you ever end up a policewoman anyway?" he asked.

Kate smiled again, making him feel younger than fifty-three, less overweight, more Irish. "I flunked home economics," she said.

The chief nodded sympathetically. He took the form back and handed the release slip to Luna. "Have a nice trip back."

"Thanks."

Luna and Kate Farr started for the door. Before they could leave, the chief spoke again.

"Say, Kate. If you ever get tired of the Chicago force, come on down here and go to work for me."

"Thanks, Chief," Kate replied. "I'll keep that in mind."

The fifty-three-year-old, overweight Irish chief of detectives grinned and winked at her, and then she and Sam Luna left.

Beverly McCall, dressed in street clothes, was waiting in the transportation room when Luna and Kate Farr arrived at the jail.

"She's all set to go," a jail matron told them. "A copy of the extradition order was given to her this morning. One of you'll have to sign for her personal effects."

"I'll do it," Kate said. She accompanied the matron to a desk at the far end of the room, leaving Luna momentarily alone with the prisoner.

"Hello, Sam," Beverly McCall said.

"Hello," the detective replied. He glanced back to be sure Kate and the matron could not overhear them.

"Long time," Beverly commented.

Luna nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, long time."

"You're looking good, Sam. The years haven't changed you much at all."

Luna smiled an artificial smile. "Clean living," he said tonelessly.

A heavy silence fell between them. Both could hear the ticking of an old-fashioned pendulum clock on the wall above their heads. Beverly McCall bit her lip tentatively.

"Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Were you there when they got Eddie?"

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Luna nodded. "I was there, Bev."

"You didn't—I mean, you weren't the one who—"

Luna shook his head. "Two patrolmen and a sergeant shot him. I was all the way on the other side of the building."

Beverly smiled in relief. "I'm glad, Sam." She looked across the room at Kate Farr. "She's attractive." Her eyes met Luna's again. "You never married, did you, Sam?"

"No, I never married. Look, Bev, I want you to tell me who Eddie's two partners were."

Her expression tightened. "I'm sure you do."

"We think they're after you, Bev. We know they didn't get their cut of the armored truck job. With Eddie dead, you're their only link with the money. They're going to want to get to you pretty badly. We think they may even try it on the train."

"You haven't told me anything I don't already know, Sam," she replied, her voice cooling slightly. "But you forgot to mention one thing: if I *am* their only link with the money, as you suspect, then I certainly don't think I'm in any danger of being harmed by them. They'd be fools to let anything happen to me."

"Assuming they could stop it," Luna countered.

Beverly McCall frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that if they try to take you off that train, there'll be bullets flying from four guns. You're just as liable to catch one as the rest of us."

"I'll take my chances on that, Sam," she said flatly, and by her tone Luna knew that she meant it, that it would be useless to press the conversation.

"Suit yourself," he told her tonelessly. He looked away.

Another silence hung between them for a moment and they listened to the clock again. Presently Beverly's determined expression dissolved into a frown and she looked curiously at Luna.

"You said four guns just now. Eddie's two partners and you make three. Who's the fourth?"

Luna bobbed his head toward the other end of the room where Kate was standing. "Her."

Beverly's lips curled into an unbecoming half sneer. "My, my. So our little policewoman carries a gun, too. Does she know how to use it?"

"I imagine so," Luna said. He added, half to himself, "I hope so anyway; she flunked home economics."

"What?" Beverly asked, frowning again.

"Nothing," Luna said.

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They had no further conversation until Kate Farr returned from the matron's desk with a small suitcase.

"These are her personal things," Kate said, giving the suitcase to Luna. "There's a car waiting to take us to the depot." Kate took a pair of handcuffs from her shoulder-strap purse. "Hold your wrists out, Miss McCall."

Beverly turned to Luna. "Is that necessary?"

Luna nodded. "Technically, you're in her custody; I'm just along for purposes of protection."

Beverly's face clouded in anger and she silently raised her wrists. Kate expertly handcuffed her and took hold of one arm.

"All right, Miss McCall," she said, and guided her toward the door. Sam Luna, carrying the suitcase, followed along behind.

On the streamliner they had two roomettes with a connecting door between them. After the train left the terminal, Kate Farr removed Beverly's handcuffs.

"I'll leave these off as long as you behave and stay away from the door," Kate said.

"You're sweet," Beverly told her coolly.

"It's part of our training," Kate replied deadpan.

Luna, who had been checking the locks on both outside doors, came over to Kate. "I'm going to take a walk back to the club car to see if I can spot any familiar faces. Don't open the door for anyone until I get back. No conductors, no porters, nobody."

"Okay," Kate nodded. She turned to Beverly. "You sit there by the window, Miss McCall."

Beverly sat where she was told. As Luna was leaving the roomette, their eyes met briefly. Luna's expression was thoughtful as he went on out the door. Beverly turned to look out the window.

Luna passed only two passengers and a porter as he walked through the other two Pullman cars. When he entered the first of four chair cars, he slowed down and with outward casualness let his eyes sweep across the faces before him. The train was moving smoothly along level track and Luna walked easily without holding onto the seat backs. He saw no one who struck a chord in either his memory or his highly developed suspicious nature.

The other three chair cars also produced negative results and Luna proceeded into the two-tiered club car. He went to the bar and ordered a plain ginger ale. While he waited for it, he scrutinized the passengers on the lower level. They all appeared very ordinary. The bar

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waiter brought his drink and Luna paid him. He took the glass and went upstairs to the observation deck. As his foot hit the top step, he spotted the two men for whom he was looking. He had no doubts.

They were sitting in one of the middle observation booths, playing cards. The one facing Luna was about the same age Eddie Casey

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had been: thirty-three or thirty-four at the outside. He was conservatively dressed, neatly groomed, unobtrusive. To Luna, he was betrayed for what he was by only two things: the flat, emotionless look in his eyes, and the slight bulge of a shoulder holster under his left arm.

Luna walked directly toward the far end of the car, unconcerned that he would pass right by their booth. They would already know who he was, so it made no difference if they saw him prowling around; the important thing was not to let on that he had spotted *them*. On his way past their booth, he studied them openly and, while they observed him, deliberately looked away and concentrated on someone else. He hoped by doing so to mislead them into thinking they had him fooled.

Luna took a seat at a small table in the rear of the car. He relaxed and sipped at his drink. He knew that the hood riding backwards would be watching him from time to time, so he did not even try to get a good look at him. He was in no hurry, however; his chance would come and he knew it. One thing the professional policeman had that the professional criminal did not have was patience, and Luna had found over the years that it usually paid off. So, patiently, he sipped idly at his drink, waiting.

In about fifteen minutes one of the men rang for the attendant. One came up from the bar, removed their empty glasses and took their refill orders. It was while the attendant was there that Luna got the close look he wanted at the second hood. Older than the first by about ten years, this man was in his forties, olive-skinned, a heavy shadow of beard, dark hair and eyes. A fellow *paisano*, Luna thought. Not from the Family; strictly free lance. No less dangerous, however, as an individual.

Luna finished his drink and left the top tier of the club car just a step ahead of the bar attendant. Back at the roomette he identified himself through the door and Kate Farr let him in.

"See anyone interesting?" she asked.

"Two possibles," Luna said. "I can't make either of them, but they're the two most likely candidates I could find." He described them for Kate and told her where they were. "Why don't you take a walk back there and see what you think. It's just possible you may recognize one of them."

Kate slipped on a cardigan sweater, put her service revolver in a clutch purse, and left the room. Luna hung up his coat and loosened his tie. He stuck his own pis-

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tol into his trousers pocket and sat down opposite Beverly McCall.

"You heard me describing those two guys," he said, offering her a cigarette. "Are they the ones?"

"What ones?" Beverly parried. She held the cigarette while Luna lighted it for her.

"You know what ones," he said patiently. "Eddie's pals. The boys who got beat out of their share of a quarter of a million bucks."

Beverly inhaled deeply and let the smoke out in a slow, lazy trail. She studied Luna from behind half-closed lids, her lips pursed thoughtfully. "Have you ever seen a quarter of a million dollars, Sam?"

Luna nodded. "Once. Right after the Pershing Savings and Loan job about eleven or twelve years ago. We caught up with the guys that did it just as they were dividing the haul."

"How'd it look to you, Sam? All that money."

Luna leaned back and folded his arms. "What's on your mind, Bev?" he asked knowingly.

"I need help, Sam."

He muttered something. "You're telling me."

She leaned toward him, almost urgently. "You could get me out of this, Sam. You could get me away from your police-lady friend *and* those two guys back in the club car."

"Well, then, those *are* the guys—"

"Maybe they are, maybe they aren't. It won't matter one way or another if you'll help me."

"Why *should* I help you, Bev?" Luna asked flatly. "Give me one good reason."

"I'll give you three," she retorted. "Me. The money. And the fact that we were all friends one time, you and Eddie and me."

"That was a long time ago. And I wouldn't say that we were exactly friends; we grew up on the same block, but we didn't exactly run with the same crowd."

"You liked me, Sam," she said. "You liked me as much as Eddie did."

"Maybe I did," he admitted. "But you *went* with Eddie."

"You never asked me not to go with him . . ."

"It wouldn't have done any good."

"You'll never know, Sam, because you didn't try." She paused just long enough for effect, and then she said the same thing she had said to him at the jail back in New Orleans. "You never married, did you, Sam?"

Luna stared at her for a long, heavy moment, then sighed and looked away. "No," he said very quietly, giving her the same answer. "No, I never married."

He turned back and they looked

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at each other in silence until Kate Farr returned. She didn't know the two men either.

At five o'clock a dining car porter came through the Pullman announcing the first call for dinner. Kate and Beverly McCall, in a temporary truce, were silently playing cassino. Luna was stretched out on the couch in the other roomette, reading. When he heard the dining car porter, he put aside his magazine and went into the women's roomette.

"You hungry?" he said to Kate.

"I could eat," the policewoman answered. She put a six of clubs on a four of hearts. "Building tens."

"Why don't you go on to dinner, then," Luna said. "When you order, you can have a tray sent in for Miss McCall. After you get back, I'll take my turn."

"Sounds like a winner," said Kate. She and Beverly finished the hand and Kate got up. "Maybe we'll play some more later."

"Sure," Beverly said without enthusiasm.

Kate freshened up and left for dinner. Luna sat down at the Pullman table opposite Beverly and laid out a spread of solitaire for himself. He let several moments go by before he said anything, and when he did speak his voice was even and very controlled.

"Where's the money now, Bev?"

She frowned briefly and then became angry. "You go to hell."

"That's no way to talk," he said calmly. "Especially to your new partner."

"My new—" Beverly's lips parted incredulously. Momentarily she shed her surprise and reached across the table to grip his hand. "Sam, do you mean it? You're not playing cop with me, are you?"

Luna shook his head. "No, I'm not playing cop. I'm tired, Bev. Tired of the whole scene. I've been a police officer, in uniform and out, for fourteen years. I make one-ninety a week and if I keep at it until I'm fifty-five the department will give me three hundred a month so I can retire to Florida and barely get by for the rest of my life." He sighed heavily and tossed the cards aside. "It's not enough, Bev—not for carrying a gun every waking hour for thirty years, not for the two slugs I took in my thigh that time; you know, my hip still aches every time the weather's damp."

"You've always been a good cop, Sam," said Beverly. "You probably never took a dollar in graft the whole time you've been on the force. What made you start thinking the way you are now?"

"I'm not sure I know," Luna answered. "Maybe it was being part

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of the dragnet the night Eddie was killed. Like I told you before, it wasn't me that got him, but I was still *part* of it. If Eddie had been a killer, maybe I'd feel differently about it. But he wasn't a killer; he was just a thief. As far as I know, he never hurt anybody in his whole life, except maybe some insurance company stockholders, and he only hurt them in their bank accounts." He shook his head slowly. "I just don't think he deserved to be cut down the way he was. And I don't think I should have had to be part of it."

"So now you want out," Beverly said.

"Now I want out."

"You're sure? You won't start it and then back out?"

"I'll finish what I start," Luna said. "I always have."

"Give me your word, Sam," she insisted. "Promise you won't take me back for trial, and promise you won't let those two in the club car get me. Promise, Sam."

"I promise."

"All right." She swallowed and sat back in her seat. "All right."

Luna waited a moment, then asked her again. "Where's the money, Bev?"

She hesitated only a split instant. "In Memphis."

"Memphis?"

Beverly nodded. "I went to New Orleans the same way you're taking me back—by train. Memphis is the halfway mark, the middle of the trip; there's an hour layover. I got off there and put two suitcases of money in one of those lockers where you put in a quarter for twenty-four hours. I asked at the information counter what happened when the twenty-four hours were up, and they said the contents of the locker would be moved to the station checkroom." She paused and wet her lips. "So that's where it is, Sam. In the Memphis checkroom. A quarter of a million dollars in unmarked bills. It's mostly tens and twenties; there's sixteen or seventeen thousand in fives, and another ten or twelve in fifties—but nothing larger than that. All packed neatly in two overnight bags."

"How do we get it?" Luna wanted to know.

"Just go to the checkroom and give them the locker number. It's eighty-three—my birthday, remember? Eighth month, third day. You'll have to identify the luggage—gray fabric with black leather trim, Sampson brand. Both bags have the initials H.C. stamped on them in gold."

Luna frowned. "H.C.?"

Beverly smiled an unamused half smile. "Hard cash," she explained. "It seemed clever at the time. Any-

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way, it'll help you identify the bags. I threw away the locker key, so you'll have to tell them you lost it. They'll charge you for it, and also fifty cents a day for every day the bags have been in storage."

"A bargain at twice the price," Luna said. He got out a timetable and checked the train's schedule. "We get to Memphis at nine-thirty and leave at ten-thirty; that gives me an hour, which should be plenty of time. I'll say I'm going back to the club car to check on the two guys, but what I'll actually do is get off the train and go into the terminal to claim those bags. I'll buy a ticket to someplace—say, Kansas City—and check the bags through to there. Then I'll get back on board—"

"Why can't we both get off at Memphis, Sam?" Beverly wanted to know. "Why can't we simply handcuff that female cop you've got with you and leave her here?"

"We could," Luna said, "if it wasn't for the two guys back in the club car. You don't think they'd let you just get off the train and walk away, do you?"

"No, I guess not. Not those two." Beverly nervously lighted a cigarette. "What do you intend to do?"

"I don't know. I'll have to figure some way to get them off our backs."

"Be very careful with them, Sam," she warned. "They aren't like Eddie; these two *are* killers. The young one shot down a bank messenger in Houston last year; the older guy murdered a guard to escape from a prison farm in Michigan. Neither one of them has anything to lose."

Luna nodded solemnly. "That makes us even, then. I don't have anything to lose either. Not now."

Luna had no trouble at all in the Memphis terminal. The checkroom attendant did not even ask for a description of the suitcases, only how many there were and which locker they had been in. Luna paid him and carried the bags to a far corner of the waiting room where no one could walk behind him. Sitting with his back to a wall, he put one of the bags on his lap. He forced one of its snap locks and opened a corner just enough to slip his fingers inside. He extracted a sample of the bag's contents: a pair of fifties, loosely stuck together.

Satisfied, he put the two bills in his pocket and used the heel of his hand to jam the forced snap-lock securely back into place. He took the bags and walked across the big room to a bank of ticket windows.

"When does the next train leave for Kansas City?" he asked one of the ticket agents.

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"Seven-forty tomorrow morning, via St. Louis," the agent replied.

"I'd like a one-way ticket, please," Luna said. "Coach."

When he had his ticket, Luna took the two suitcases to the baggage counter and checked them aboard the morning train to Kansas City.

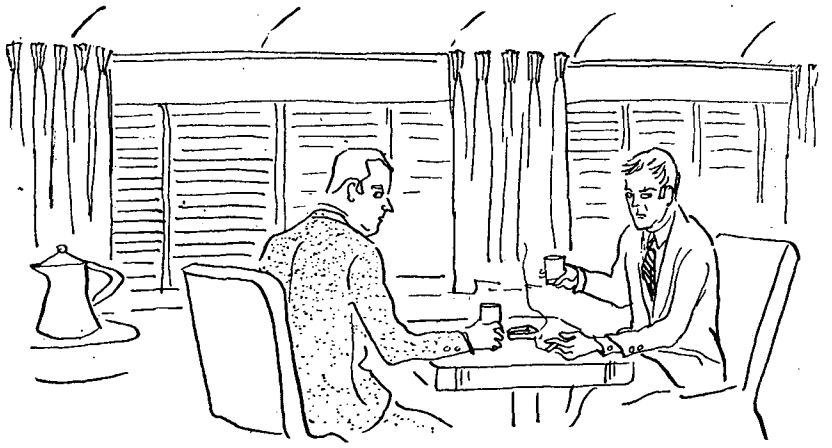
"It isn't necessary to pick these up as soon as I get off the train, is it?"

"No, sir," the baggage agent told him. "The baggage room in Kansas City will hold them for seven days without charge. After that, they'd be put in baggage storage and charged for by the day."

Luna nodded. "Thanks."

He took the two claim checks and walked over to a magazine counter. He bought a package of envelopes, a book of stamps, and a newspaper. Returning to his bench in the corner, he carefully wrapped the claim checks in a strip of newspaper and sealed them in one of the envelopes. He stamped the envelope and addressed it to himself in care of General Delivery in Kansas City. He threw the rest of the stamps and envelopes and the newspaper into a trash receptacle and deposited the envelope in a nearby mailbox. He still had twenty minutes to spare when he got back on board the train.

Luna found the two hoods in the club car again, on the lower level this time, occupying a small window table. They watched him as he stood at the bar and waited for the attendant. This time, as they looked at him, Luna looked back, his gaze meeting theirs flatly, unequivocally, as if accepting a challenge.



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When the bar waiter came over, Luna ordered a straight shot with a water chaser; he had already decided that he would need a bracer for what he was going to do. He paid for the drink and downed it mechanically, sipping just enough water to cut the sting but not the taste from his mouth. Stepping away from the bar, he picked up a newspaper from a nearby chair. Folding it into quarters, he unobtrusively slipped his revolver inside it. He walked casually to the table occupied by the two hoods and sat down opposite them. He held the newspaper-concealed gun on the table.

"There's a thirty-eight Magnum inside this paper," he said quietly. "It's loaded with hollow-point slugs that'll tear you apart at close range. Consider that, plus the fact that I'm carrying a badge and that both of you are armed fugitives. In other words, I can gun you both down right here and now, and nobody would even question it. And that's exactly what I intend to do if either of you give me any trouble." He paused to let his threat sink in. "Do we understand each other?"

The young one, who had killed the Texas bank messenger, and the older man, who had murdered the Michigan prison guard, looked first at the folded newspaper, then at Luna, then at each other. It took them less than half a minute to see Luna's point of view.

"Okay," the older hood said resignedly, "you get no trouble from us. What do you want?"

"I want you both to get up and walk out of here in a normal manner. Walk one in front of the other. Be very careful about your hands; keep them out at your sides at all times. That's important because I'll be walking close behind you, and the first time I don't see four hands, I'm going to start shooting. Is that clear?"

"Yeah. Clear." The older hood nodded. "Where do you want us to walk to?"

"The roomette," said Luna.

"What roomette is that?" the young hood asked, speaking for the first time.

Luna looked at him, his gaze flat. "Don't try my patience, punk," he warned.

"Lemme do the talking, will you?" the older man said edgily. "And don't get any funny ideas, either."

"That's good advice," said Luna. He glanced quickly around, observed nothing unusual, and nodded to the men. "Move."

The trio walked unnoticed from the club car and into the chair car section. The younger man led the way, the more cautious older man close behind him. Their hands, as

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Luna had ordered, remained in sight. The detective, following, carried the folded newspaper half raised in front of him like a bandaged hand, with his finger securely on the trigger. He walked just far enough behind so that it would not appear that the three of them were together.

From the last chair car they proceeded into the Pullman section. There was less chance of being observed there, and Luna moved up to follow more closely.

"You're doing fine, boys," he told them easily. "Just fine."

They passed through a second Pullman car, entered a third, and came to the first door of the double roomette.

"Knock," Luna ordered the young hood. He did, and Kate Farr answered from inside.

"It's me," Luna said through the door. He saw the handle turn and the door opened an inch. "Move inside," he said, "like very carefully."

The two hoods edged into the little room and stood uneasily, facing a gun held by Kate Farr. Luna came in after them and closed the door. From the window seat, her wrists again cuffed together, Beverly McCall watched in confusion.

"The money?" Kate said.

"Kansas City, on the morning train." Luna tossed the paper aside, exposing the Magnum. "Let's go over it quickly, one last time."

"Sure," Kate said. "You went to check the club car and these two tricked me and forced their way in while you were gone. They were trying to make me give them the key to her handcuffs when you suddenly returned. They went for their guns and you killed them. One of their guns slid across the floor and she made a grab for it. I had to shoot her to keep her from shooting you." She smiled a sexy smile at Luna. "How's that for a gal who flunked home economics?"

"Fine, baby. Just fine."

Luna's face was devoid of emotion as he coolly shot the two hoods.

Behind him, Beverly McCall screamed his name just once before he heard the sound of Kate's gun.

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When the wheels go 'round and 'round sometimes the cogs become discombobulated.

A Man of Confidence

THEY SAY you never hear the bullet that kills you. I didn't hear the slug that missed me, so I guess the barrel was silenced. I wasn't even scratched. The draperies caught all the fragments of glass, but the spinning lead tore an unsightly hole through my framed certificate, hanging on the wall opposite my desk.

There had been no warning, no phone calls, no ace of spades through the mail, no poisoned dog on my doorstep, but I knew who it was, and why. Sordini, called the Sicilian Howard Hughes in Vegas, was sore because, in a weak moment, I had helped his intended victim escape. Now I was the victim.

I called the police for an escort home, and next morning I applied for a permit to carry a concealed weapon. I also tried to conceal my anxiety from my wife. When you repress something hard enough, though, it shows up in other, often disturbing ways.

"Don't you love me anymore?" was Helen's complaint after about three days.

"Tax-season fatigue," I lied, to cover the fear-induced impotence.

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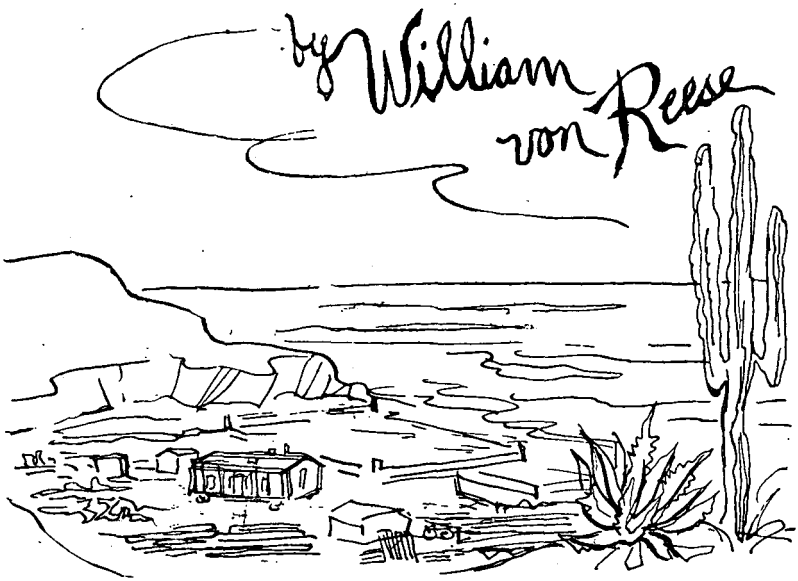
I couldn't just run away to Yucatan, like Daniel Fernandez. I had wife, children, and a busy accounting practice. I had to stay, to win a reprieve from Sordini's death sentence.

I searched for an answer during sleepless and sweaty nights. I lay on my back, one hand touching steel under my pillow, where I sneaked the gun from under the mattress after Helen fell asleep. I ran through the whole Sordini audit again, projecting it on the frantic walls of my mind.

A mutual client in Beverly Hills had referred me to investigate a hotel project Sordini was backing in San Malandro, a remote little fishing village in Baja California, and away I went.

In San Malandro I stood on a crumbling cliff above the sea, taking camera shots of failure: foundation trenches filled with wind-



blown sand, plundered piles of building materials strewn over the site, a job office that hadn't been opened in months. Inside, dust covered the working prints, the typewriters and adding machines.

Daniel Fernandez stood beside me, shading his eyes and looking out to sea like he had just discovered it. "We'll put the marina there." He pointed to a rocky inlet. "Fence it off there, and bring in

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a lot of white sand for a beach."

"Where are the books and records?"

"In my suite at the Lucinda." He pronounced Lucinda the Spanish way, but his English was free of accent.

"I expected to find records kept at the job."

"But you couldn't work on them here, Mr. McWilliams."

I saw what he meant. Temperature and humidity were near one hundred. There was no air-conditioner in the travel trailer that served as job office.

"Lock it up," I said, sick of the heat, the fetid humidity, and the signs of fiasco. "Let's get out of here."

We walked back through the town that reeked of fish, diesel oil and beer, and climbed the mesa to the airstrip.

"Perfect spot, eh?"

"For sunburn and sand fleas."

"But the project will need more money."

"About five times the original estimate."

"But think of the potential, Mr. McWilliams. Posada San Malandro will be a gold mine. Within two years dividends will be fantastic. Fantastic!"

He went on describing the spell-binding enchantment of San Malandro and dropping jet-set names, style-setters he would personally attract to the resort.

One look at San Malandro had convinced me otherwise. It was barren desert, hot in summer and cold in winter, a land of sandstorm and flash flood. It was a rat hole, not a gold mine.

We buckled up inside the broiling cabin of my plane, and I climbed like crazy to reach the cooler air aloft. The trip back to Mexicali took only forty minutes.

I could see why Fernandez preferred the Lucinda Hotel, in Mexicali, to the job site. The hotel flaunted the luxury of green grass, an imitation aqueduct that disgorged precious water into a bikini-edged pool, three bars and a nightly floor show. I got the feeling that Fernandez was very cozily settled into this posh oasis.

At dinner I met Mona Matanzas, the exotic dancer of the floor show. Offstage, she shared Fernandez' VIP suite, which I now recognized as the official headquarters of the San Malandro project.

Next morning I started work on the books at a massive table in Daniel Fernandez' suite. I plugged in my ten-key adder, pulled two sizes of worksheets from my briefcase, and got down to business, finally.

Cash receipts consisted of investors' money coming in, and checked out to the $750,000 I ex-

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pected; nothing unusual, except one receipt which had come as a bank draft, in *lire,* from Rome. The name of that investor, Frank Marcos, rang distant, barely-audible bells, which I then ignored.

Cash disbursements were the problem. There were a few construction costs, such as labor and materials, but most of the checks were written for bribes and licenses, entertainment, travel, food and drink, advances to Fernandez, and presents for Mona. Legal fees were out of sight.

"It is not simple to do business in Mexico," Fernandez explained. "You have to pay the *mordida,* or you get no cooperation."

"And the prepaid attorney fees?" He had spent enough in legal fees to defend and clear Adolf Hitler of all charges.

"One of the best firms in Mexico."

"Why so much?"

"There is some problem of title to the land."

I just couldn't believe it. "Didn't you make sure of the title first?"

Fernandez shrugged. "There is no title assurance in Mexico. Many people may claim the same parcel of land. It will have to be decided in Mexico City."

"What about construction? You have already started."

Fernandez oozed reassurance. "Mr. McWilliams, I promise you there will be no problem with the land. Money solves everything in Mexico. Everything."

"But the money is all gone."

"Then we must ask for more. It is not simple to do business in Mexico. Not simple."

"You don't seem to understand, Mr. Fernandez. Your investor group, headed by Mr. Sordini, expects to build the entire forty units for their three-quarter million. When they get my report—"

"Tell them how the profits will roll in. I know the business and I know the trade: five years in Acapulco with top management, mingling with the cream . . ."

I had heard it all before. The man really believed his own dream. No wonder Sordini and company were swayed, especially when Fernandez had hinted that gambling was to be allowed in San Malandro.

I told him to go back to the pool with Mona while I finished up. Then I footed and cross-footed the worksheets I would use as exhibits in my report to Sordini.

I composed that report mentally the next day while flying back home. By the time I started to let down for Orange County Airport I had the text pretty well outlined. It was simple, short and devastating. Sordini and company had been

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had—by a charming, persuasive and irresponsible con man.

By Tuesday night I had the report typed. I mailed it to Sordini Enterprises in Las Vegas, enclosing my bill for $2,500 plus expenses. Then I forgot all about it, busying myself with my regular clients, whom I had somewhat neglected in order to take the Sordini assignment.

I was working late and alone in my office one night when the phone rang.

"Mr. McWilliams?" an uncertain voice asked. "Your wife said you might be reached at this number."

He sounded like a man on the run, and when he showed up at my office he acted like one. Fernandez was trembling, and his fingers, when we shook hands, were like refrigerated wieners.

He nudged aside the draperies to peek out the window. Once tall and slender, he now seemed stooped and gaunt. Grayed temples were white. Nightmare had driven out the dream in his haunted eyes. He was eaten up with resentment which, I discovered with surprise, was directed at me.

"How could you do it, McWilliams? How could you blow the whole project?"

"I had to give my professional opinion."

"Couldn't you see that San Malandro . . ." And he was off again, blending the seductive wines that had drugged some pretty sober heads, like Sordini's.

Luckily, the phone rang. It was Helen, wondering when I'd be home. It broke the spell just in time. I was almost ready to put my own money into the project, but talking to one's wife has a way of bringing back reality.

"If you're still convinced, why don't you set up a meeting with Sordini?"

"You think I haven't tried? He won't even see me, thanks to you."

"How do you mean?"

"Your report was a death warrant. Not only for the project. For me, personally."

In the fluorescent-lit solidity of my office his words were unbelievable. Still, Sordini would be capable of a vendetta against a man who wasted three-quarters of a million dollars and who made him, Sordini, look like a schnook.

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Talk to him. Tell him your report was wrong."

I tried to explain about professional standards and ethical codes. This did not register. We could not communicate about San Malandro, because to him reality was the Dream, while to me reality was the Report.

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I had learned something about he con man: he truly believes in iis dream. He sets fire to others beause he is consumed in flames iimself. A cynic could never be so onvincing.

I felt sorry for him; sorry and uilty, somehow, for having deliv-red this daydreaming lamb to the laughter. On impulse, before tak-ng second thought, I offered finan-ial and moral help to this false rophet.

"Where would you be safe?" I sked.

"Mexico. Maybe Cozumel, or ucatan."

"You have friends or relatives here?"

He nodded, turning to peek out he window again. He looked very ale. "He's still there, watching my ar."

I kept a couple hundred in cash n my floor safe. I let him have hat, figuring we could buy the air-ine ticket on a credit card. We left he office lights burning and went ut the back door to my car, head-ng for Orange County Airport.

I left my car at the tiedown and lew him in my plane to LA Inter-ational. Ground Control cleared is to taxi right up the Aeronaves amp. There was a flight leaving or Mexico City almost before I ould sign the credit card invoice. The clerk phoned to hold open the gate for boarding passengers.

"Sordini will listen to you," Fernandez said as he loped down the long corridor to the boarding gates. "Tell him for me: San Malandro is a winner."

Act in haste, repent at leisure—only I was not going to enjoy much leisure. Sordini's man was following me now, waiting for his chance. I was sure of it. I no longer dared work alone at night.

I tried to get Sordini on the phone, but I couldn't get past his secretary. I groped and fumbled for a way to escape. I couldn't go on asking for a police escort forever. Carrying the gun was no help. I was such a poor shot, a rubber sword would serve me better.

An answer came, as many answers do, while I was thrashing through a restless night—not sleeping, but not awake, either. Something started dinging faintly in my mind, and I went back to that bank draft from Rome. I had made photocopies of all remittances and related documentation. The name of Frank Marcos was sounding in the lobby of my mind like an urgent page call.

There had been something in a news magazine about this man, years ago deported to Italy, and recently involved in some international scandal; a dope thing, un-

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covered in Istanbul. That was it: Frank Marcos.

I could hardly wait to get to my office. I found that photocopy in my files and clung to it like a kid with a lifetime pass to Disneyland. I figured it this way: Sordini's operation in Vegas had to be kept scrupulously legal. Evidence of an underworld connection would be ruinous, might trigger an inquiry of Congressional proportions.

So I sent a special-delivery letter, return receipt requested, asking for an appointment at Mr. Sordini's early convenience. For sender's name I used Frank Marcos.

It worked. Next morning I had Sordini's private secretary on the line. "Would three o'clock be convenient?"

I made a photocopy of my photocopy, locked the best one in my floor safe, and called my wife from Orange County Airport.

"With any luck I'll be back tonight," I told her. "Cured and pawing the ground."

I climbed into my plane, took off and pointed the nose toward Las Vegas.

The Seraglio Suite is one of the older casinos on the Strip, close in to town. A new tower, topped by a fifty-foot belly dancer with a neon navel, had been tacked onto the original structure.

My alias of Frank Marcos whisked me past the checkpoints like magic. Within five minutes I had ascended from lobby to penthouse, nucleus of the Sordini empire.

Sordini wore a business suit, 48 long at least; sunken cheeks and broken nose; nails glossed with clear polish; cologne and cigar smoke. My strongest impression of him was one of control, intense and tidy self-discipline.

"I knew it had to be you, McWilliams. Sit down. Cigar?"

I declined the cigar and the proffered drink. I hoped to be flying back home, and I don't like alcohol inside me when I fly.

"You puzzle me, McWilliams. You're hard and soft at the same time. Your report was a good, solid piece of work. But helping Fernandez get away was soft."

"How did you know I helped him?"

Sordini mixed himself a drink, short on Scotch and long on soda. "Years ago I learned the value of double check. Like double entry in your profession, it prevents errors. When I hire someone to check something, I hire another man to check the checker. That way I get the truth."

"And I almost got a bullet," I said. "Your bullet. That's why I'm here."

I pulled out the photocopy and

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read off my ultimatum. Sordini shrugged and waved it aside. I felt like a country boy on a big-city used-car lot.

He snorted. "My lawyers can handle that and, if necessary, you. I didn't expect blackmail to be a tactic of your profession."

"I was down to my last tactic," I said, feeling sheepish. "Being shot at disturbs my work habits."

"I can appreciate that. But let me straighten you out. I know the truth. You don't."

Sordini admitted having gone after Fernandez. "Such a man spells ruin for the serious investor," he said. "He should be removed from the financial scene." He went on to explain that much of the three-quarter million had come from humble workers in the brotherhood; bread from the mouths of babes, so to speak. Fernandez had cheated them all.

"The man assigned to get Fernandez has been punished for failing in his duty. That is only good discipline."

"Then why go after me, just because I helped Fernandez?"

"I have done nothing to you, McWilliams. Except pay your bill and compliment you on a good job."

"What about that bullet?" I said.

"That bullet wasn't mine."

I didn't want to believe him, but I had to. "Then who?"

"I had you under surveillance at the time by a private agency. They reported Fernandez fired the shot at you. He didn't exactly appreciate your report, you see."

Then Fernandez had not boarded the Aeronaves plane that night. He had come back to get me first. I had destroyed the Dream.

I crumpled the photocopy and tossed it into Sordini's wastebasket—another rubber sword. I departed under the shame of Sordini's amused and sarcastic smile. In the taxi back to the airport, I kept thinking that the quality of my mercy had really been strained.

Just for a breather after tax season, Helen and I jetted down to Cozumel and toured Yucatan. In a hotel bar one night we heard some news about Fernandez' final project, financed by resident Americans.

Among some remote Indian ruins, he was promoting a resort for private pilots to be called the Fly-In Mayan Motel—but he never got it started. He was showing some investors around one day when he fell—or was pushed—into a spinning prop.

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Let it be noted here that certain developments are, at times, not perceptible in progress, but only in result.

Miss Evangeline and the Monster

Miss Evangeline Sabrina Withermane couldn't believe her eyes as she looked out of the window of her bedroom and saw the flying saucer circle, spin to the left a little, and then set down just as pretty as you please in the middle of her front-lawn flower bed with not so much as a by-your-leave.

"Well, I never!" she exclaimed aloud. "Right in the middle of my jack-in-the-pulpits! They're ruined beyond repair, no doubt about it!"

She didn't wait for the little green men to disembark. There simply wasn't time. She would have to make a report to the police at once. It was urgent. Why, perhaps the whole town was being invaded—the entire planet maybe!

She scuttled downstairs, picked up the telephone in the hall, dialed the familiar number of the police station and waited for the ringing

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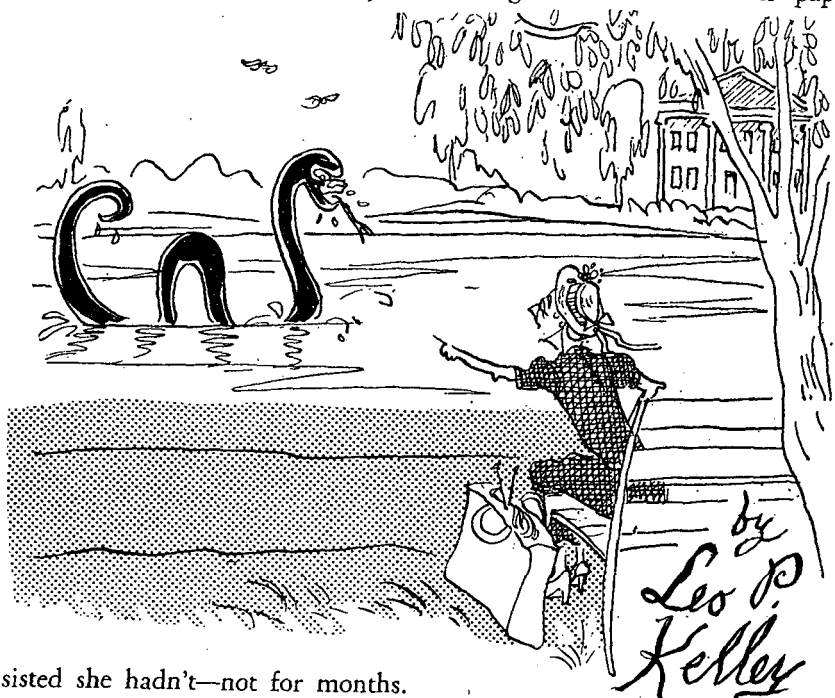
to begin. When it didn't after two agonizing minutes, she remembered. They had disconnected her; nonpayment of bills or some such nonsense. She had told the phone company that she was certain that she had paid her bills, but they insisted she hadn't—not for months. Being the lady that she was, she had refused to argue further and spent the rest of the day in a blue sulk.



She put down the phone with distaste. Actually, she had never really liked the machine to begin with, not since the very day her papa had had it installed all those lost years ago. She preferred face-to-face contact with people, preferably genteel.

She hurried out to the garage in back of her ancient house, which was circa 1800, and got into the vintage Packard which her papa had taught her to drive not long before he was unkind enough to die and leave her not only heartbroken but all alone. She rolled out of the open doors of the garage like a Sherman tank and rumbled down the driveway.

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The saucer, she noted, was still sitting insultingly on her lawn. Well, she'd see about that, oh, wouldn't she just!

Later, as she parked in the central square of the small southern town, she noticed the letters lying on the seat beside her. She picked them up. One was from someplace called the City Tax Bureau. Another was from the water company. Would they never leave a lady in peace? She got out of the car and dropped them, unopened, into the trash can on the corner.

Past the statue of the Confederate soldier, past the tiny post office and all the little shops, went Miss Evangeline Sabrina Withermane. She marched up the steps of the police station and into its relatively cool interior. Flying saucers on a Monday! It was simply no way to begin a week.

"Afternoon, Miss Evangeline," said Patrolman Carson, who was standing near the entrance reading the notices on the bulletin board. "Nice day."

She gave him a polite nod and asked to see Sergeant MacReynolds.

"Something wrong, Miss Evangeline?" Carson inquired.

"Indeed there is. I want to register a complaint."

"Something bothering you again?"

"Yes, Officer. A flying saucer."

Carson whistled softly through his teeth. "A flying saucer, is it? Last week, when we met over at the drugstore, you told me you wanted to report—what was it you wanted to report that day, Miss Evangeline?"

"The Mulberry Mall Monster," she replied. "But I haven't time to go into all that now. Where is Sergeant MacReynolds?"

"In his office."

Miss Evangeline marched down the hall and into Sergeant MacReynolds' office, trailing magnolia scent like an elegant feather boa behind her.

As she entered his office, MacReynolds glanced up from the papers on his desk and sighed at the sight of her. "Good afternoon, Miss Evangeline," he said, and sat back in his chair.

"Good day to you, Sergeant. I want to report a flying saucer."

"Well, well."

"It landed on my front lawn at exactly 3:09 this afternoon. I looked at my watch as it landed—3:09 exactly. Will you send a squad car or whatever it is that should be sent—at once? It's sitting right there in the middle of my jack-in-the-pulpits, which you know I prize most highly."

"Is it from Mars?"

"However would I know?

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That's for you to find out. I notice you're not writing this down."

MacReynolds sighed a second time before picking up a pencil and beginning to write on a blank piece of paper.

Miss Evangeline turned toward the door, but before leaving the office she glanced back at MacReynolds, who had stopped writing. "You do believe me, don't you?" Her voice was plaintive. MacReynolds heard a lost little girl hidden in it.

"Now, Miss Evangeline," he said, "I'll send someone over to investigate. Don't you fret."

"Thank you ever so much, Sergeant. You see, my jack-in-the-pulpits—"

"I'll have Patrolman Carson investigate first thing. Good-bye, Miss Evangeline."

When she had gone, MacReynolds looked down at the piece of paper on which he had written: *Bats in the old girl's belfry*. "Carson!" he yelled.

Carson appeared instantly in the doorway. "She's at it again, right, Sergeant?"

MacReynolds frowned. "Don't they teach you youngsters respect for your elders anymore? Yes, she's at it again. But why wouldn't she be? She lives on a pittance from her father's estate, which is doled out to her annually by a law firm up in New York, and what was good enough twenty years ago isn't worth a damn today. You ever heard of inflation?"

"Sorry, Sergeant."

"I'm sorry, too. A lady like Miss Evangeline just isn't properly equipped to deal with our nervous world. Sometimes I'm not so sure I am either." MacReynolds muttered something about the bomb.

Carson cleared his throat a moment later.

MacReynolds looked up and drifted back to the present and the matter at hand. "A flying saucer landed on Miss Evangeline's lawn at 3:09 this afternoon." His expression warned Carson not to smile. "I want you to drive by—make sure she sees you—and do whatever a policeman is supposed to do when investigating a flying saucer."

Carson promised that he would do just that. Right away.

Instead of going home to face the bizarre evidence of interplanetary invasion plopped on her front lawn, Miss Evangeline drove to Mulberry Mall where she had made up her mind to spend the rest of the afternoon. She had no idea how long it would take Patrolman Carson to dispense the flock of flying sauers she imagined must be parked in the neighbor-

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hood by now, frightening people.

She parked outside Mulberry Mall which got its name from the mulberry bushes planted along its north border, separating the Mall itself from the mayor's ornate mansion which adjoined it. There were more bushes growing along the promenade that began beside the river and ambled along for nearly a mile and a half.

As Miss Evangeline entered the Mall, she saw that the daily invasion of children had taken place. They possessed the Mall totally. They were everywhere—on the swings and teeter-totters and sliding boards, burrowing in the sandboxes and threatening to break their necks on the jungle gyms. The sight of them pleased her. She had, during recent years, come to feel much more comfortable with the children, far more comfortable than she was able to feel with their parents who insisted upon discussing such confusing matters as stock options and floating (or was it sinking?) bond issues and Christian Dior. But the children—oh, they were quite something else! She often helped them build their forts or find four-leaf clovers or scale the heights of Xanadu.

She sat down on a bench in the shade of her favorite elm tree, her large knitting bag at her side, and looked around at what she had come to think of as her territory. Everything seemed to be in order, but she couldn't be entirely sure, of course, because she had forgotten to bring her glasses and the effect without them was both disarming and disconcerting. Disarming, because it gave a slight but pleasant haze to her surroundings, and disconcerting because she could not sort out the faces of the children according to the names that she knew belonged to them. Well, never mind, she advised herself. This afternoon she would simply sit and suffer the little children to come unto her—if only they would.

The first one did a few minutes later.

The little girl's name was Mary and she had cut herself. She displayed her wound proudly to Miss Evangeline, who promptly rummaged through her knitting bag and brought out a bottle of antiseptic and daubed some of the red liquid on Mary's bony knee.

"Do you ever slide?" Mary asked.

For a moment, Miss Evangeline didn't quite understand the question. Then she said, "Oh, dear me, no. I haven't been on a sliding board in ever so long."

"Why not?" Mary wanted to know.

The answer that occurred to Miss Evangeline was absolutely unutter-

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able, so she shooed the shockingly young child back to her playmates, simply refusing to reply.

Through the elms, she could see the mayor's mansion. It gleamed whitely in the late afternoon sun. She had never seen the mayor in any one of the mansion's many windows but she was always expecting him to appear, if only briefly. She was a staunch supporter of his and of the party to which they both belonged. He didn't know of her existence, of course, but she knew of his, and if things were a bit unbalanced in that regard, well, such was the way of the world.

She suddenly remembered that a mayoralty election was due—why, next week! She pulled a notebook and ball-point pen from her knitting bag and made a note to remind herself to vote. After all, it was her civic duty.

She fed small biscuits to a boxer and a cocker spaniel who passed her bench during the next hour.

She looked out several times toward the river, but the Mulberry Mall Monster did not appear. She had seen it twice now. The first time, she had called out to the people nearby as she pointed at it, but they had missed seeing it. They had merely shaken their heads and smiled in the oddest way. The Monster was clever and had evidently been too quick for them. But *she* had seen it! She made another note:

Tell Sergeant MacReynolds to bring depth charges.

The Mulberry Mall Monster's days were numbered, she thought with grim satisfaction as she gazed serenely across the Mall.

Now what was that man doing over there by the red maple? She squinted, damning her eyes for growing so old so soon.

Pinning a note to the maple tree, that's what he was doing. She got up and hurried over to him, not caring that curiosity killed cats, or so people said.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Evangeline," the man said, turning at the sound of her approach.

"Hello, Mr. Michelson." She squinted. "What's that? A message for someone?"

"It's a note offering a reward for the return of Mitzi, our poodle. She was stolen right here on the Mall yesterday. I was here with my wife and little boy, and Mitzi was off the leash and running around and all of a sudden she was gone."

"She ran away?"

"No. Mrs. Ralston was nearby and she told me later that she saw a man pick Mitzi up and run off with her. I'm offering a $250 reward."

"That's a great deal of money,"

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Miss Evangeline said with surprise.

"My little boy cries all the time since we lost Mitzi. So the money doesn't matter."

"Not in terms of tears, no," Miss Evangeline agreed sagely if a little vaguely. "I do hope you get poor Mitzi back." She strolled back to her bench and watched the windows of the mayor's mansion but he didn't appear, not even for a moment. So she shut her eyes to rest them.

When she opened her eyes again, the sun had gone out. There were stars in the sky. Why, she had been asleep! And there was Mr. Michelson at the red maple as if no time at all had passed. She watched him remove the note from the tree as she eased herself to her feet, cursing the stiffness that ached in her ankles and knees. She had almost reached the exit from the Mall when Mr. Michelson came abreast of her.

"You were taking the note down," she said. "You must have found Mitzi," she added hopefully.

He shook his head but there was a happy smile on his face. "No, not yet. But a man phoned and said he had her and would consider meeting me and turning her over to me if I asked no questions. I assured him I'd ask no questions. I just want Mitzi back. He might be the thief, but I don't care about that. I'm on my way to meet him now."

"You should have called Sergeant MacReynolds. Stealing dogs is a criminal matter." Miss Evangeline fell silent for a moment. "No," she mused. "It probably wouldn't have helped all that much even if you had called him. I reported an earthquake under my house to him just last week and he told me I was imagining things."

"Good-bye, Miss Evangeline," Mr. Michelson said. "Can you get home alone all right?"

"Most certainly. Good night, Mr. Michelson. Say hello to Mitzi for me."

She walked to where she had parked the Packard and got in. She spent some time searching for the ignition key but at last she found it in the bottom of her knitting bag. She started the motor. As she drove up the street, she passed Mr. Michelson standing in the shadowy entrance to the alley that ran behind the shops on Main Street. She drove on slowly because the darkness of the town and the dimness of her eyes urged caution on her. She glanced in the rear-view mirror to be sure no one was close behind her before preparing for the turn that would lead her onto her own street.

She saw Mr. Michelson and another man standing on the deserted street beside the alley entrance. But

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where was Mitzi? She slowed down then, shocked, as she saw Mr. Michelson raise his arm but fail to shield himself from the blow the other man delivered. She stopped her car in the middle of the street as Mr. Michelson fell to the pavement and the other man knelt beside him and began to go through his pockets. She got out of the car and hurried breathlessly back to where Mr. Michelson lay. The assailant collided with her as he fled the scene of his crime. Even without her glasses, his pale face beneath the street light, his thin mustache and the evil in his eyes were indelibly imprinted on her mind.

When she recovered from the collision, she hurried to where Mr. Michelson lay groaning and holding his head. She helped him get to his feet and he told her that the man had stolen his wallet and the reward money he had brought with him.

"But what about Mitzi?"

Mr. Michelson grimaced and touched the base of his skull. "He laughed when I asked him where Mitzi was. He just laughed and then he hit me."

"Call the police at once."

Mr. Michelson said he didn't want any trouble. If he called the police, their activities might scare the man away for good and then perhaps he'd never get Mitzi back.

Miss Evangeline secretly decided she would personally report the incident to Sergeant MacReynolds, but when she arrived home later, after dropping Mr. Michelson off, she decided it wouldn't do any good—because the flying saucer still sat smack in the middle of her flower bed, glowing greenly in the light of the moon. Patrolman Carson had failed to remove it!

The next afternoon, Miss Evangeline sat close to the mulberry bushes on the Mall, looking as inconspicuous as just another berry. She had planned it that way. The Monster might appear at any minute and she didn't want it to spot her before she had a chance to sound an alarm.

She had remembered to bring her glasses with her this time, so she clearly recognized Patrolman Carson while he was still some distance away from her.

As he came up to her, he said, "Hello, Miss Evangeline. I'd planned to give your flying saucer a ticket for illegal parking yesterday, but when I got to your place it had gone. I did notice, though, that your jack-in-the-pulpits weren't a bit crushed."

She eyed him suspiciously. It was true that her flowers, this morning, had stood as straight and brightly staunch as if no saucer had ever

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landed on them, but that would undoubtedly have something to do with the invader's advanced aerodynamics. Carson was lying to her because the saucer had still been there when she arrived home last night. She was about to accuse him of lying when a new thought occurred to her. Perhaps the saucer had taken off during the day and then returned later. That would explain why Carson hadn't seen it. Perhaps he wasn't lying after all. She began to feel more kindly toward him. She searched in her knitting bag and brought out a candy bar which she handed to him with a conciliatory smile. He took it, touched his cap, and was off down one of the paths, whistling a tune by the Beatles.

Miss Evangeline surveyed her domain with a certain uneasiness. She was thinking about Mitzi and poor Mr. Michelson and his sad little boy. The theft was a shameful thing to have happened right under the nose, so to speak, of the mayor. If the opposition party ever found out about it, it might mean political disaster for the incumbent—a lost election. She tried not to think about it anymore, vowing that she would not tell tales out of school, and Mr. Michelson, she recalled, had said he wouldn't report the matter to the police. So perhaps all would still be well for the mayor. She concentrated on the others who shared the Mall with her, counting them, categorizing them.

An old man over there feeding pigeons from a brown paper bag—that would be Joe Carlotto, who was on Social Security; two ladies, almost as old as herself, strolling along the river promenade; the inevitable children—everywhere, the nannys with their prams. But who in the world was that one in the white uniform and the bleached hair? She looked like a fugitive from the chorus line of some cheap nightclub. Miss Evangeline didn't mean to be unkind; it was simply that she was a keen and usually correct observer of people and their characters.

The girl—she couldn't have been more than twenty-five—sat down on a nearby bench, the pram she had been wheeling parked beside her. She unrolled the glossy magazine she had been carrying tucked under one arm. Miss Evangeline pushed her glasses up on her nose and stared at the cover: *Screen Dreams*.

A boy and girl, arm-in-arm and oblivious to Miss Evangeline, the Mall and all the rest of the world, strolled by. Miss Evangeline knew she had nothing in her knitting bag that they might want or could possibly use. They were young and

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had each other. She sighed and closed her eyes and dozed in the spattering of warm sunlight that spilled through the leaves and landed on her thin shoulders.

When she woke up again, something was wrong. She could feel it! The children were all right. All the dogs were walking safely on their leashes. The mayor's mansion was still there. Then what?

It was the man sitting beside the girl with the copy of *Screen Dreams* in her lap. The two of them were talking earnestly—whispering. The girl didn't seem to mind the man's thin mustache or the evil in his eyes; but Miss Evangeline minded. She looked about for Patrolman Carson, but he had vanished. She tried to think calmly. What should she do?

She wouldn't scream. Ladies did not scream. Before she could arrive at a decision, events began to unfold before her. The man got up and walked away, but not far. He loitered near the ice cream vendor's truck. The girl promptly put down her magazine, winked at him, closed her eyes and immediately began to snore! The man sauntered back toward her, but instead of waking her, as Miss Evangeline had thought he was going to do, he began to push the perambulator down the path. Within seconds, he had disappeared from sight.

Miss Evangeline sat stunned, her mouth frozen in an unuttered cry, her hands clenched in her lap.

The girl pretended to awaken, and then she screamed. Her scream was twice as loud as the town's fire siren. All activity in the park came to a standstill. Everyone stared and then came running to the girl's side—even the children.

"The baby!" the girl screamed at the top of her shrill voice. "Someone's stolen the *ba-by*! Help! Police!"

Miss Evangeline, icily calm and thoroughly determined, got up from her bench and walked toward the girl. She heard the comments from the gathered crowd as she approached.

"He wore sunglasses and a fedora. I saw him just as plain!" That was Mrs. Ralston.

Joe Carlotto patted the girl in what Miss Evangeline considered to be a most indiscreet place and manner, and said, "Don't you worry none, hon. They'll catch whoever it was."

"It was a woman," someone volunteered. "Tall, she was."

Miss Evangeline pursed her lips and thought that none of them would be able to identify a fly in amber even after they'd seen it twenty times. She plowed through the crowd.

"There, there," she said

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soothingly to the girl. To Carlotto, she said, "Call the police at the box on the corner." To Mrs. Ralston, she said, "Get some water from the drinking fountain." To the girl, she repeated, "There, there." And then, "I'll take you to—where does the baby live?"

The girl sobbed and said, "His name's Sonny Emory. He lives—he lived . . ." She began to cry, muddying her eyes with mascara.

When Mrs. Ralston returned with the water in a paper cup, Miss Evangeline and the girl were gone.

In the Emory livingroom, Mrs. Emory was having hysterics. Miss Evangeline had phoned for a doctor, who came and promptly gave Mrs. Emory an injection. The girl sat sobbing on a stiff chair in the middle of the room. Patrolman Carson arrived as a result of Miss Evangeline's urgent summons.

"We checked," he said, "and found the baby carriage down on the promenade. It was empty."

Mrs. Emory shrieked for her husband. The doctor had already phoned Mr. Emory's office and asked him to come home at once.

Miss Evangeline listened to the answers the girl gave to Patrolman Carson's questions.

Her name was Polly Loring. Yes, she had references.

Had Mrs. Emory checked them before she was hired?

No, Mrs. Emory had not, being anxious to hire someone to help her with Sonny.

Mrs. Emory moaned.

Carson wanted to know if the Emorys had any enemies.

None, according to Mrs. Emory.

Had they received any threats lately—of any kind?

Mrs. Emory shook her head.

Mr. Emory arrived half an hour later and Carson questioned him. The distraught Mr. Emory could supply no information of value.

No one asked Miss Evangeline anything so she left.

Twenty minutes later, she followed Carson's patrol car at a discreet distance, and when he escorted Polly Loring into the police station for what Miss Evangeline assumed would be the third degree, she parked across the street to wait. She opened her knitting bag and took out a leatherbound copy of Browning, but she couldn't concentrate on the words, lovely as they were.

The girl came out half an hour later. She walked jauntily up the street and turned the corner.

Miss Evangeline drove after her, keeping out of sight.

The girl entered the Queen's Arms Hotel. Miss Evangeline knew all about what went on *there*. Everyone in town did. She parked her car and strode stiffly

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into the lobby. Polly Loring was nowhere in sight.

Miss Evangeline went up to the desk and rapped on it impatiently until the tieless room clerk appeared. "Mr. Evanston, I'm Miss Evangeline Sabrina—"

"Howdy, Miss Withermane. What brings you here?"

"There was a kidnapping on Mulberry Mall this afternoon and—"

"Hooeee!" Mr. Evanston exclaimed. "Everybody in town's talking about it already. Biggest thing that's happened around here since Joe Carlotto tried to blow up the Social Security office last year."

"The nursemaid involved—Miss Polly Loring—is staying here, I believe."

"Yes, indeed. Room 190."

Miss Evangeline went to the elevator and up to room 190. She knocked firmly on the door, her mouth grim; but she remembered to smile sweetly as the door opened a crack.

"Who're you?" Polly Loring asked, peering out into the dimly lighted hall.

"My dear, I was on the Mall this afternoon when the Emory baby was kidnapped. Don't you remember me? I helped you—"

"Oh, sure. Yeah, I remember you now. But listen, I got a splitting headache, you know?"

"I saw the man who took the boy."

Polly flung open the door she had been closing in Miss Evangeline's face. "You *saw* him?"

Miss Evangeline drew an index finger across her upper lip. "He had a rather sickly-looking mustache. He wore tan slacks and a checkered sweater. He looked like vanilla ice cream, his face, I mean, so pale."

Polly sputtered something Miss Evangeline didn't quite catch. "May I come in, dear? I'd like to talk to you a moment, if I may."

Polly reluctantly stepped aside as Miss Evangeline pushed open the door and stepped into the shabby room. She promptly sat down and told Polly she was frightened nearly out of her wits. She told her about the flying saucer and about the Mulberry Mall Monster. "Now this," she said. "I'm afraid for my life savings," she added significantly.

"Your life savings," Polly repeated.

"All fifty thousand dollars," Miss Evangline said, shocked at the enormity of the lie she had uttered. "Perhaps I really should put it in a bank—"

"You keep it at home?"

"Don't trust banks. Never did."

Polly's eyes grew wider.

"Well, the reason I came," Miss Evangeline said, getting down to

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business, "was that I wanted to ask you if perchance you had recognized the man who kidnapped Sonny, as a result of my description of him. If you have any idea who he is, it would make matters so much simpler for the police. I'm afraid they would never listen to me, but if you went to them and identified the—"

"No," Polly said, shaking her head. "I got no idea who he is."

"Well," said Miss Evangeline, "that is a pity. I'd best be going then."

She was almost out in the hall when she heard the dog bark from inside Polly's room. Polly was trying to shut the door, but Miss Evangeline held her ground. "Your —your poodle?" she prompted, opening the trap.

Polly nodded. "Yeah, I keep her shut in the bathroom. She's messy. She was a gift from a guy I know."

"Well, you take care of yourself, dear. You've had a terrible shock. Here." Miss Evangeline extracted a bottle of aspirin from her knitting bag. "Take two of these and draw the shades and lie down with a cool cloth on your head. I'm so sorry to have disturbed you."

She went out into the hall and, satisfied with her performance, walked to the elevator. Well, she guessed she knew where Mitzi was now. But where was Sonny Emory? In the bathroom, too? She had no time to speculate further. She had to hurry home. She was expecting guests later in the evening.

At eleven o'clock that night, Miss Evangeline darkened her house, put a wool shawl over her shoulders and stepped out onto the porch. She shut the door, locked it, walked to her Packard, got in and drove off into the night.

She parked the Packard just a block away and walked back behind the hedges growing on the lawns of the houses across from her own. The night was cool but she found her shawl sufficient for it.

At eleven-thirty, the guests she had been expecting arrived. They slid like shadows up the lawn and onto the porch where they tried the front door and found it locked. The man opened a window. The girl climbed inside and he followed her.

Miss Evangeline quickly crossed the street and went around to the side of her house. She pulled up the slanting cellar doors and descended the steps into the furnace room. She could hear them moving noisily about upstairs. Inept, she thought. She hoped their ineptness would not cause harm to the Emory baby—or to Mitzi. Well, she would simply do what she had

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to do, pray a little, and hope for the very best.

She quietly mounted the steps that led to her kitchen and opened the door cautiously. They were still in the livingroom. She could see the beams of their flashlights flitting along the floors and up the walls.

"I looked upstairs," Polly whispered. "She's not in the house. Look, Jack. There it is!"

He swore softly, staring at the wall safe. "We'll have to tear down the wall to get at the loot."

Miss Evangeline stifled a gasp. She hoped they wouldn't do that. The repair bill would be staggering. She'd never be able to afford it. She listened, peeping uneasily around the corner of the kitchen cabinets.

Polly was shining the beam of her flashlight on the wall safe. The man was fumbling hopelessly with the dial.

"Jack, look out!" Polly screeched in sudden alarm. "The wall's caving in!"

Miss Evangeline clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the giggle that almost escaped her lips.

"Well, will you look at that!" Jack exclaimed. "A secret room. I just touched the corner of the mirror there and the fireplace swung out. Shine your flashlight in there."

Polly did as she was told and they both spotted the piles of money stacked in a far corner.

"Come on!" Jack whooped, stooping to enter the room, Polly right behind him.

Miss Evangeline scurried mouselike out into the dark livingroom, expertly dodging furniture. "It's no good!" she shouted gleefully. "It's *Confederate* money!" Then she slammed the fireplace back into position, flush with the rest of the wall.

The muffled shouts and the pounding from behind the wall gave her a keen sense of satisfaction. She switched on the lights and picked up the phone to call Sergeant MacReynolds.

"Drat!" she exclaimed in annoyance when she remembered that the instrument had been disconnected. She left the house and her helpless prisoners locked in the secret room, and walked to where she had earlier parked the Packard. Conscientiously observing the speed limit, she drove to the police station.

The next day, she sat in her rocker on the front porch and waited for them to come for her. It had all been so exciting. She hadn't slept a wink the whole night through, after the police had come back to her house with her and then had released Polly and Jack

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from the secret room behind the fireplace, which had once served to hide runaway slaves when the house, which had been in Miss Evangeline's family for years, had been a station on the underground railroad.

Sergeant MacReynolds had come back later and congratulated her, after taking Polly and Jack to the jail in the courthouse. She told him she had just been doing her duty. After all, she couldn't tolerate such goings-on right under the nose of the mayor. It could ruin his career and she wanted to see him elected for another term.

Ah, there they were, just pulling up in front of the house in their squad car. She got up and went down the drive to meet them.

Sergeant MacReynolds got out and she took his arm and sat beside him in the back seat while Patrolman Carson drove them to Mulberry Mall and through the wrought-iron gates that led to the mayor's mansion.

The mayor took Miss Evangeline's hand and kissed it, precisely as she had known a gentleman of his stature would do under the circumstances.

"I wanted very much to meet you, Miss Evangeline," he said, "after Sergeant MacReynolds told me all about you. He told me you were a staunch supporter of mine. He told me, too, how you caught the kidnappers—"

"They were dognappers, too," Miss Evangeline interjected.

"Yes, that, too. Well, thanks to your presence of mind and, if I may say so, your *daring*, Sonny Emory is back safe and sound with his parents once again. They found him, as you know, sound asleep in that terrible man's room at the Queen's Arms Hotel."

"And Mr. Michelson and his little boy have Mitzi back."

"Yes, Mitzi, too. You are a remarkable woman, Miss Evangeline."

"A woman, yes," Miss Evangeline said softly. "But remarkable? Oh, dear me, no."

"Tush," said the mayor. "You're far too modest."

Later, over tea served in the Robert E. Lee Room, the mayor informed Miss Evangeline that her antebellum home had been, at his direction, designated a city landmark. "I had no idea that your lovely house had a secret room or that the room had served as a station on the underground railroad. Now that just might raise a few eyebrows in this town, still—"

Miss Evangeline said, "If the legends are true, Mr. Mayor, it also provided a hiding place for retreating Confederate soldiers on more than one occasion."

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"We'll emphasize that fact in our press release about the house." He went on to explain to Miss Evangeline that her property would be tax-exempt from now on as a result of the executive order he had issued. He explained that her telephone would be reconnected and paid for, of course, by the city, as befitted her home's newly-declared status. He told her that she would be appointed official caretaker of the newly-created city landmark and that she would be paid a modest but, he hoped, a satisfactory monthly salary, quite in keeping with the latest cost-of-living index issued by the federal government.

He was so kind and the room was so pleasant and MacReynolds and Carson were so full of smiles, Miss Evangeline simply could not resist making the most of her opportunity. She leaned over and whispered something to the mayor.

His eyes widened, then narrowed. He started to smile and then thought better of it. "MacReynolds!" he said in his mayor's voice. "Miss Evangeline has just given me a report on what she calls the Mulberry Mall Monster. It seems that it is some sort of—of—"

"Sea serpent," Miss Evangeline supplied helpfully. "I've seen it twice in our river next to the Mall. Most unsightly, especially considering the neighborhood."

"A sea serpent!" Carson spluttered. "She *couldn't* have seen a sea serpent! Not in *our* river!"

MacReynolds silenced him with a fierce glance.

"Patrolman Carson," said the mayor solemnly, "Miss Evangeline's keen perceptions are what led to the capture of the kidnappers of Sonny Emory—"

"And the dognappers of Mitzi," Miss Evangeline reminded him gently.

"Yes. Of course. So under the circumstances, an investigation of the Mulberry Mall Monster would seem to be definitely in order."

"Definitely," said MacReynolds.

"I'll expect a full report," the mayor said.

MacReynolds and Carson left the room.

Miss Evangeline sipped her tea and found it sweet.

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Of what men say, the words wield most strength in truth.

A SUNDAY IN THE PARK

by Joan L. Oppenheimer

DAVE MADDOX woke that Sunday morning with a tired, empty feeling. As he made breakfast and ate alone, without Katie and the twins, the house echoed around him coldly. Katie would call tonight from Chicago, half a continent away. Her mother was home from the hospital now, though the end could come at any time.

Katie knew that. She cried in his arms the night before she left.

"How can I bear it, Dave? How can I *bear* it?"

He couldn't go with her. With his new business barely out of the red, that was out of the question.

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He knew she would come through the ordeal stronger and braver than before. Still, it hurt sending her off alone.

"Katie, you can do anything you have to do," he told her, holding her close. "Sometimes you don't know how strong you are—until you're tested."

"You're my strength," she said, her voice muffled against his chest.

He winced, remembering. Even with the hours he worked, he missed her terribly. In fifteen years, he had forgotten the knack of bachelor existence. It was just that, existence; a marking of time until he and the house came alive again with the noise and clutter and laughter of his family.

He left the house at eleven and drove aimlessly through the city. Then he took the first down ramp and followed the road to the point where it became a boulevard choked with Sunday traffic. He passed the cutoff to the zoo. Not without the twins, he decided, and headed for a secluded parking area farther on where he could usually find a vacant slot.

He eased the car into the last space, turned off the motor, then glanced automatically at the car on his left. A young girl and an older woman were sitting there. For a moment, hearing a loud angry voice, he thought their radio was on. Then he realized from the way the girl's head bobbed back and forth that the voice was hers.

"Jealous!" she was saying. "That's all you are—jealous!"

Abruptly, both of them turned startled faces toward Dave. He looked away quickly, got out of the car and headed toward the Museum of Natural History, dismissing the uncomfortable moment as he went. The museum seemed boring today, however, without the stimulation of the girls' interest, their endless questions. The day stretched ahead with hours yet to fill. He headed for the art gallery.

There, in the west wing, he saw the two women again. They were obviously mother and daughter. In fact, the likeness struck him even before the fact of their remarkable beauty. At one time the mother's hair must have been the same startling silver-blonde as the daughter's. Now it had undergone some kind of touching-up process, giving it a more sophisticated tone, and there was curl and shape to it. The girl wore her hair in the current teenage style, long and straight, parted in the middle. It fell well below her shoulders.

He guessed her to be about fifteen or sixteen. She had her mother's great dark eyes and ivory skin. They wore identical outfits,

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the sweaters and stretch pants so good on small-boned women with slender bodies, outlining every curve of high-thrusting breasts and narrow hips.

He would have given them no more than a moment's pleased consideration, however, if it had not been for another obvious fact. They were still quarreling. Their low, strained voices carried no clue, but the tension between them was almost a tangible thing, implicit in the mother's quick gesture, restrained before she touched her daughter's arm, and in the girl's shoulders stiffening at the threat of that touch.

As if she felt his gaze, the girl turned sharply and looked at him, her eyes narrowing with hostility and something close to contempt. Her glance included two Canadian sailors standing nearby who were staring at her with obvious appreciation.

Dave turned away, his face burning in instant response to the angry accusation in her eyes. Feeling a fool, his movements studied and casual, he strolled down the long room and through the arch. As he crossed the lobby into the opposite wing he felt a fervent gratitude for his own daughters, endearingly awkward at eleven, wholesome and uncomplicated.

An hour later, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the two women enter the last of the narrow rooms in the east wing, and he left hastily by the far door to avoid the possibility of another confrontation. Except for him, the room had been empty, and the girl's voice carried through it. He heard her caustic words clearly.

"It's a lie! You're lying to me! I'll never believe it!"

He left the gallery, with several rooms still to investigate. He had lost all interest in art in that first unwary moment when he touched reality. Or, rather, when that curious, almost shocking, tension between the two strangers had reached out to touch him.

Between the gallery and a building housing a puppet theater, he found an empty bench and he sat in the sun for a while. Couples strolled past, holding hands. The two Canadians sprawled on the grass nearby, close to a group of American sailors who lay motionless, hats tipped over their eyes. It was quiet except for the laughter of children chasing one another along the paths and through the high, thick hedges behind him.

Slowly Dave relaxed, sliding forward on the bench until he could rest the base of his neck. Closing his eyes, he let the sun warm his face, the back of his eyelids turning a bright orange-red. His head filled

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with a faint, contented hum . . .

Wrenching himself awake, he sat up and blinked just as a familiar figure turned and walked quickly down the path that curved by his bench. Long silvery hair flashed in the sunlight. Had she been watching him? Where was her mother? He saw the door to the gallery swing open. The older woman emerged, looked around for several moments, then reentered the building.

Dave felt a faint tinge of anger, directed more at himself than at them. If they had intruded upon his day, the privacy of his mood, it was because he had allowed them to do so. He should have minded his own affairs, left that first room the moment they entered it without paying any attention to their squabble. Forget it, he told himself. Forget the whole thing.

He should have gone to the zoo after all, he thought wryly. Observing a lower, less complex species might be less demanding, just as entertaining, and a lot more comfortable.

After several minutes he got to his feet and started down the path the girl had taken, hoping he wouldn't bump into her again in the parking area. Around the first bend, hidden by shrubbery until he was almost upon them, he met her in the company of a park policeman garbed in a khaki uniform.

Taken by surprise, Dave stopped abruptly. Seconds later, his mind registered the fact that she was pointing at him.

Even more incredible, her voice, high and excited now, was making a fantastic accusation. "He's the man, officer! He's been following us ever since we got here. Then he came after me to the parking lot and—and he tried to kidnap me!"

Dave stared at her, dimly aware that his jaw was sagging. It seemed to him that they stood for several minutes locked in a silence unbroken by the slightest sound, an eerie humming vacuum.

The girl's eyes had a hard gleam. She returned his gaze without a hint of embarrassment, without the faintest sign of discomfort. Her mouth had firmed, yet it retained the look of innocence, incongruous in the echo of her life.

The policeman waited, his eyes alert and cold.

Feeling his heart pump wildly, Dave tried to speak. His voice failed him. It took an effort to manage two words. "Why *me?*"

Her eyes flickered. For the first time, for a second or two, she looked childish and unsure. "You!" she said. "You sure must think you're something special, following girls around the park." She turned to the officer. "He said to me,

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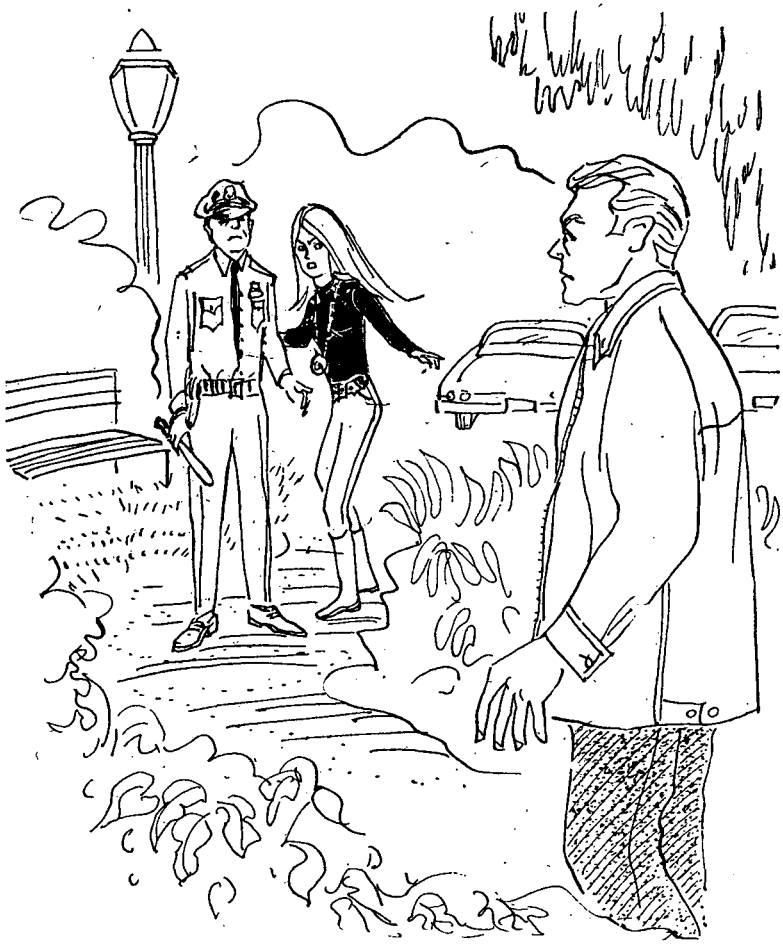

'Come on, baby, I'll give you a lift home.' "

Her voice rose and broke raggedly, but on a note of pure exhilaration. It shone on her face, trembled at the corners of her finely shaped mouth. Her chin puckered for a moment, as though she might be about to cry. She swung around once more to glare at Dave. "*Baby!* If there's one thing I *loathe,* it's being called 'baby' by—by somebody like you!"

The policeman cleared his throat.

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"Let's have the whole story, miss. I want to know exactly what happened, all the details. Come on, now, don't be afraid."

Afraid? No, she was enjoying this, Dave realized, sickened. She was enjoying every minute of it. But why was she doing it? Just for kicks? "You're lying," he said. Again he found it almost impossible to control his voice. He jammed his shaking hands into the pockets of his Windbreaker, thinking he must look guilty as hell. "What did you do, slip away from your mother? Does she know you like to play games like this?"

She didn't change expression, but for an instant laughter gleamed in the dark depths of her eyes, as if she were pleased to find a worthy adversary.

"My mother and I got separated," she said, her voice soft now, calmer. "As you know very well. You followed me from the gallery clear down to the parking lot. You knew it was away from everything, with trees all around it. You were counting on that, you—"

The policeman cut in. "Stick to the story, please."

It shook her a little, Dave saw. That quiet, emotionless tone rattled her for a split second. He made a note of that as he battled a rising tide of desperation. This girl was trouble, the biggest threat to him—and through him, to those he loved—he had ever faced. Even as he watched, he felt fear building within himself.

He had actually been accused of attempted kidnapping! He tried to sort out the legal aspects of such an accusation. He couldn't. *Kidnapping.* The word came up and hit him with all the stunning impact of a sledgehammer.

"Well," the girl said, "when I told him to get lost, that's when he grabbed me. I mean, he tried to force me into his car—" Suddenly, she pointed at the zipper on Dave's Windbreaker. "There! The little pull-tab on his jacket zipper, see that? When I fought—when I got away, it scratched my arm. See?" She shrugged her sweater off her shoulder and held out her arm to show them a long ugly scratch.

Dave leaned forward for a closer look. The abrasion was undoubtedly fresh. "You could have done that, going through one of the hedges," he said. His voice shook, and he told himself, angrily, he *sounded* guilty now. Guilty, guilty, guilty . . .

"I could have," she snapped, "but I didn't. You did it."

"Your own fingernails could have—" He stopped as she held out her hands to display nails bitten so deeply that a little pad of flesh bulged out across the top of each

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finger. Evidence of instability? She smirked at him.

Knowing he was close to violence, Dave gathered the full force of his fury and directed it against himself. He choked on rage when he spoke. "You're a lying little—for God's sake, girl, do you know what you're *doing?*"

Abruptly, he knew that she did. He heard her high, clear voice again, saying to her mother, "It's a lie! You're lying to me! I'll never believe it!" She must be avenging herself in some twisted way, healing an unknown hurt by hurting him, a stranger.

Would her mother help, or would she make the situation worse? She had been distraught, blind to everyone and everything but her daughter and their quarrel. She might go to pieces at the first mention of that ugly word, kidnapping, yet now the mother seemed to be his only hope.

The girl stood silent, her face composed, staring at him. Then, before he could make the request himself, she said in a plaintive voice, "Let's go find my mother. I want my mother."

The policeman jerked his thumb. "Move out, buddy. I'll be right behind you."

Dave led the way up the path. Then, through his hazy, whirling thoughts, he remembered the Canadian sailors. They could help! They had seen him sitting on the bench. Hope leaped high for a moment as he looked for them. They were gone.

He felt a faint, sour surprise at the depth of his feeling. He hated this girl. If he could get his hands on her, he would shake the truth out of her in a hurry, yet by the time they reached the art gallery door his anger had burned away. He felt only nausea, a numb disoriented reaction to nightmare. It seemed too big an effort to think, to plan what he must do, even to lift one foot and place it before the other.

With an odd objectivity, he saw the girl's mother standing just inside the door, her back to them, scanning the faces in the lobby for the one she sought. She turned just as the officer reached for the door handle, her face frozen, startled. As she came outside, her dark eyes searched her daughter's face.

The policeman murmured to her for a minute or two. She nodded politely, seeming oddly unmoved by his brief account, neither surprised nor shocked.

As Dave watched, his protective shield deserted him. What *was* it with these two women? What was wrong with them? Again, he felt a cold, mounting fear. Would the mother go along with the lie, the

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monstrous lie that might destroy him, that would hurt Katie and his girls? She gave every evidence of doing just that.

"Officer, I would like to talk to this lady for a few minutes—alone."

The policeman looked at him with cool, appraising eyes.

"Look, before this thing goes any further—I've been accused of something for which you have only her word. I'm not going to do anything stupid. I have a family to consider. All I'm asking is a few yards' distance between us, and five minutes to talk to this lady."

Still the officer said nothing. He stood silent, thoughtful, weighing the request.

Probably he had a family, too, Dave reflected. He felt his pride writhe within, a painful thing, a totally irrelevant and foolish thing at such a moment. He swallowed hard against it. "Please," he said.

The other man nodded. The girl made a sharp gesture of protest but he raised his hand, silencing her.

Dave moved a short distance away. The older woman followed him, reluctance on her face. She stood away from him stiffly, holding herself in rigid control.

"She's lying," Dave said. The moment he spoke, he wished he could recall the words. They burst from him as though they had taken life of their own from his overwhelming need to fight back, to show somebody, tell somebody, make somebody see the truth.

"My daughter does not lie." Her voice was low and tight.

"I'm sorry," he said, but his voice was not. "The thing is, I just can't figure out what she's doing—and why. I can't . . . think straight. It's almost as if I were in shock."

She looked at him, her face stony except for her eyes. They angrily rejected such a blatant plea for sympathy.

He talked for several minutes then, soberly, his voice quiet. He told her about himself, about his family, his job, his background. He saw as he talked that none of it was doing any good. She would not, could not believe that he was the man he said he was. She was afraid, for if she believed even one small part of his story she would know the truth about her daughter.

Even as he spoke, he pondered that point in a corner of his mind, the small corner that remained objective, a spectator at his own destruction. When he paused at last, the silent spectator commented with unemotional logic: She knew the truth already; of course she did. She never would have followed him to one side to hear his story, if she didn't suspect the truth.

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"I have twin girls," he said, his tone brusque. "I told you that. I found out years ago, when they were quite small, that they could con me with no effort at all. Girls can with their fathers."

"Yes," she said.

It stopped him. He had not expected her to contribute anything, but he must have hit a nerve somewhere in that apparently nerveless area behind the beautiful unlined face.

"I asked Kate then—my wife's name is Kate—how come they couldn't fool her? I mean, they almost never put anything over on her. I never forgot what she said. It sure seems to fit—this. Fathers know their sons, she said. Mothers know their daughters."

The silence stretched. He watched her. She looked a little sick. There was a greenish pallor to her skin. He thought exultantly, *She's going to crack.*

"Is that all?" she asked. "Is that all you wanted to say to me?"

He stared at her, unbelieving. She was going along with it. She would see him in hell before she'd admit the truth—and she knew the truth.

Again, panic threatened. *Easy,* he thought. *Easy does it.* His hands were clenched so tightly in his pockets, cold and slippery with sweat, that his arms began to throb. His throat was parched.

He had to get through to her somehow. He had to. *You can do anything you have to do,* he had told Katie, and he believed it. The belief was as much a part of him as his brain, heart, and lifeblood. In his mind he could see Katie again, trying to smile though her eyes were still wet, accepting those words.

The reel of memory wound itself back to the beginning, back to the first accusation. The girl had enlarged on that, he recalled.

It must have shown in his eyes, the sudden surge of relief when he knew he wasn't beaten yet, that he had been right. When the stakes were high enough, when they covered everything he valued, everyone he loved, he could do whatever he had to do.

He saw her face change subtly, as though she had taken up the burden of fear at the moment he felt free.

"You're protecting her," he said. "It's too late for that. You do know your daughter. You believe everything I've told you."

She didn't answer.

"I have a wife and daughters to protect, too," he said. "I'm warning you now, if you push this thing, your girl will be the one who gets hurt. I'm going to tear her story to shreds. You'd better think carefully

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about what I can do then, about the legal aspects of the situation."

Her eyes waited, dark and silent, without light or mercy.

"I can prove your daughter is a liar," he said. "There were a couple of Canadian sailors in the gallery. When they came out, they sat on the grass over there while I was sitting on that bench."

He followed her gaze, then said calmly, "Yes, they're gone now. I don't think it would be hard to locate them, though, somewhere in the park. I have a hunch they'd be more than willing to testify that they saw me sitting there when all this was supposed to be taking place down in the parking area."

He paused. "There's a chance, of course, that they can't be found. There's the real possibility that they wouldn't remember me, couldn't recall how long I sat on that bench. Do you want to gamble on that?"

Still she said nothing.

"There's another way," he said. "We can go down and reenact the episode the way your girl describes it. She's added to her story two or three times already. She's going to do it again. Sooner or later, she'll trip herself up—and I'm going to take her apart. That cop over there is going to help me do it. Of the four people involved here, three of us *know* she's lying, and the other one suspects as much. He's had experience with kids like yours. When I tell him you were quarreling when I first saw you in your car, that you were still quarreling inside the gallery . . ."

A spasm of pain crossed her face. "You've made your point," she said. She rummaged in her bag for a handkerchief and blew her nose. "I don't think I would have let it go much further," she said, "but if you want revenge, well, all I can say is, I'll never know for sure, will I?"

She lit a cigarette with hands that shook so much she had to use three matches to get it going. He didn't make a move to help. He couldn't. He felt too weak with relief at the moment even to speak.

"She's been—almost out of control since—since the divorce," she said. "Today we fought bitterly ever since breakfast. She wanted to go and live with her father."

He couldn't stand it. He had seen the face of the enemy. He didn't want to know the heart, the brain, the savage or human impulses behind the face. Wanting to end it quickly, he prodded her when she paused.

"You wouldn't let her go?"

She looked at him, her eyes bleak. "He doesn't want her. There's another woman, a young woman. I broke down—there in the gallery. I had to tell her the

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truth. She didn't believe me." She paused and took a breath, then let it out again cautiously. "I—I thought she didn't believe me. But after what she did, I guess I was wrong. I'm sorry, Mister . . . ?" It seemed to be the final straw, the fact that she didn't know his name.

Dave said softly, almost to himself, "Then it was her father who called her 'baby'?"

"Why, yes," she said. For a moment, she looked as if she would ask the obvious question. Then her face crumpled and she turned and ran, stumbling, back to her daughter.

Dave watched her talking to the policeman, dabbing at her face with her handkerchief. He could hear only an occasional word. The girl turned her back after one scornful look.

The officer beckoned to him. "Do you want to make a formal complaint, sir?"

At that, the mother broke completely. Tears smudged her makeup across her high cheekbones. The daughter's eyes remained dry, burning in her white face with open, sullen contempt.

Dave hesitated. Then he shook his head. The two men watched until the women rounded the curve in the path, the mother several steps behind the girl. Neither of them glanced back.

The officer sighed. "You were right, I guess. It wouldn't have done any good, not with that one. What gets into these kids?"

Dave shrugged. He stood for a few minutes with a drained, sick feeling after the other man walked away. He should feel sorry for the girl, for anyone with problems like hers, but he couldn't, not yet. When he told Katie, then he could feel pity. When he saw his own girls, when he held their skinny, hard little bodies close, then he could release the tight knot inside himself—but he couldn't feel that the nightmare had truly ended until he heard Katie's warm voice. The thought of her and their girls had been the one thing sustaining him. He had to tell her that. He couldn't wait for her call tonight.

At a half run, he headed toward the parking area.

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Contrary to professional opinion, germs may range in size to approximately six feet, but that does not make them indestructible.

LET SAPROPHYTE DO IT

by Earle N. Lord

"Cigarette?" I said to Everly, who smirked at me across the small table in the dim and crowded cocktail lounge. He started to refuse, then shrugged and took one from my battered old silver case.

"These are my brand!" he exclaimed with surprise. I almost reminded him that all sorts of people smoked them, but no use irritating the man before we even began the dirty business. I lit his cigarette with a hand that I had to steady forcibly.

I studied his well-known features. I was not used to seeing them in color rather than the black and white of newspaper photos. I wondered what I looked like through those shrewd show-business eyes of his. I knew I certainly did not have the appearance of a man capable of committing murder.

"Mr. Brennan," Everly said, flicking his wrist to glance at a watch which had multi-colored jewels instead of numerals, "I hope you have not gulled me. You stated on the phone that if I came down from the Tower for one drink, you would put me onto something spectacular, something you could not possibly discuss in my office or on the phone. You led me to believe that you were up to something deliciously dishonest. Frankly, you simply don't look like the criminal type to me."

"I am a criminal," I said, drawing carefully on my cigarette. "I

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am committing a crime right now."

Everly clapped his hands together. "Now, that is more like it," he exclaimed with a glittering sunburst of a smile. He flicked his wrist again. "You have three minutes, old man, then I leave this nasty little sewer." He leaned back again and raised his eyebrows delicately. "What could you possibly have or do that would be of any conceivable value to me? And where is the drink you promised me?"

"There will be no drink." I put out my cigarette. "I paid the waiter to stay away from this table."

Everly blinked. His smile flickered out, leaving a strained and petulant expression in its wake. He started to rise, then sat back down in the booth when I brought up the gun that had been on my lap. It was a large, ugly black revolver that belonged in a cowboy movie instead of a twentieth century cocktail lounge. Everly now looked a little peaked. He tried to keep his eyes away from the business end of the gun but could not. They kept wandering back to it.

"It is a real revolver, Everly," I said. "It's loaded and the safety catch is off. I'm putting it back under the table now, but I want you to remember that it's there. I don't want to shoot you in here, but I will if I have to. Please take me seriously. I meant it on the phone when I said this was a matter of life or death."

"I told you then and I tell you now, that is a drearily trite and hackneyed phrase," Everly said, snuffing his cigarette out in an ash tray.

"The phrase fits the situation that brings us together. It is a trite and hackneyed situation."

Everly glared at me. "Suppose you get to the point. Just what is your complaint? Who in hell are you, anyway?"

"My name is John Brennan. I'm a professor at U.S.C. You don't know me, but you do know my daughter, Ellen."

His glare became a puzzled frown. "As a television producer, I meet an extraordinary number of girls. I don't seem to recall any recent Ellens."

"You know her as Eileen Roberts. You've seen a lot of her in the last two months."

His frown became a forced smile. He started to leave the little booth, but I raised the gun again and he sat back down. He took out another cigarette from a case in his coat. I lit it for him with my free hand. This time his hands were trembling.

"The gun makes you nervous," I said. "It should. I'm expert with it

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up to about twenty yards. I've been practicing daily at a pistol range. Don't try to leave the booth again. I would hate to make a scene in here."

"I would detest being in one, Professor! Go ahead and speak your piece. You have my full attention. I am the proverbial captive audience, if there ever was one."

"I've made a decision concerning you. It's a very drastic decision, so I want to give you a chance to change it."

Everly sent me a glance that showed he thought I was a candidate for the funny farm. "Proceed, Professor. What's your proposition?"

"I've studied you carefully," I said, "and frankly I don't expect much of anything to come of talking to you. I don't think you really pay much attention to words. They are too much your stock in trade, things to be twisted around by you to suit your own selfish purposes."

"Suppose you dispense with the character analysis and say something sensible, you old goat," Everly snapped.

"The point is this, Everly. You have my daughter under exclusive contract for three years. You've made it plain to her that as a condition to featuring her in one of your major productions, she must visit you on call in your penthouse. I want you to drop that insulting condition and let her perform freely."

"What's wrong, is your little girl so innocent? She's in the wrong business for that."

"Ellen is my only child," I said, carefully choosing my words and trying desperately to control my temper. "I have been both father and mother to her since she was twelve. All she has ever really wanted to do since she was a little girl is to dance. You have encouraged her, built up her hopes, then set your vulgar price. She is essentially a good and moral girl, but you are tearing her apart."

"Essentially, you are afraid that she will give in to what you describe as my vulgar demands?" Everly grinned. "Suppose she does? What will you do about it?"

"I plan to kill you if you do not promise to leave her alone."

"You'll shoot off that cannon in here?"

"No, that will not be the method. I might hurt an innocent bystander. After two weeks of practicing with this thing on a pistol range, it occurred to me that I was being foolish. It was ridiculous for a man in my occupation to consider such a crude method."

Everly frowned a little. "I'm sorry, but I don't seem to recall just what you do for a living—what

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you teach at the university."

"I never mentioned it. I'm a microbiologist, to use the latest term for it. You may be more familiar with the old term, bacteriologist."

Everly's strained features took on a slightly waxen hue.

"It's quite a thought, isn't it?" I said. "Every day I work within reaching distance of pathogens that would make your hair stand on end."

"Pathogens?" Everly said, after clearing his throat.

"Excuse the shop talk. Pathogens are microorganisms which cause disease in animals."

"And you are planning to run up and stick a needle in me?" Everly asked incredulously.

"No, that would be pretty hard to do. Because of that and other drawbacks, I've never considered using a pathogen directly. I'd have to use one for which there is no cure, and that might cause an epidemic. No, the pathogens are definitely out."

Everly lit another cigarette. "If those things are out, old fellow," he said weakly, "might I inquire as to just what is in?"

"I am using a saprophytic toxin. Saprophytes are microbes which live outside the human body. A few of them produce toxins or poisons fatal to man. You've probably heard of one of them, the botulism organism. It is the best known."

"I've heard of it," Everly said.

"It produces a toxin of fantastic potency. A few molecules of it will kill a mouse. An amount no larger than a grain of salt will exterminate a horse. Some people have been killed by just placing a bit of contaminated matter inside their mouths, then spitting it out. And this was naturally-produced dilute toxin! In my laboratory, I can purify and concentrate the stuff into a crystalline form a thousand times more deadly. One tiny crystal of this material in your mouth and you are doomed if the antidote is not administered before the first symptoms appear."

"And when does that happy event take place, Herr Doctor?" Everly seemed to have regained his composure.

"Three to six hours after ingestion. The victim sees color fringes around bright lights, has double vision. His mouth and throat become dry. He becomes very feeble, loses the ability to speak, has difficulty in breathing and swallowing, and usually dies in a deep coma."

"Are you planning on slipping a contaminated olive into one of my many martinis?"

"No. A piece of toxin the size of an olive would be enough to kill everyone in this city. A single crystal on a piece of bread or on the

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edge of a water glass would be quite enough for a person of your weight."

"All right, Professor, your three minutes are up," Everly snapped. "I am truly convinced of your terrible powers. I am both awed and impressed. Tell me what you want."

"I've told you. Let Ellen dance and drop your vulgar condition."

We stared at one another, then Everly nodded aside to someone. Before I could turn to look, my arms were seized and pinned to my sides. Everly slipped quickly out of the booth and away from my line of fire. A husky, deep voice rasped in my ear. "Drop the gun, buddy, or I'll break your arm."

I dropped the gun, and Everly quickly reached under the table and scooped it up. Placing the weapon inside his jacket, he leaned toward me over the table.

"You want me to leave your little girl alone, your little darling who was twenty-three years old last month. You request an answer now. I'll give you one, you old bat. I want her. She is the only girl who has even halfway hesitated over what you call my insulting conditions. My offer to her stands. I think I'm doing her a favor, old man. As for you and your goofy crystals, if you manage to get within fifty feet of me again, Sandy will beat the living hell out of you."

Sandy let me go and stepped away to stand next to his employer. He looked at me the way a cat looks at a goldfish. I made one last try.

"Mr. Everly, if you walk out of that door without promising to leave Ellen alone, you will die. Sandy will not be able to protect you."

"We'll see about that, old man. I think the police will be willing to protect a person of my stature from a nut like you. Thank you for some interesting ideas. I'll try to use them in a show sometime, and I'll have your Ellen return your blunderbuss to you." Everly turned and strolled out into the blinding sunlight with the husky, hulking bodyguard trailing behind.

A few minutes later, I followed Everly out the door and walked down to the police station several blocks away. On the way, I threw my cigarettes and the botulism antidote into a street drain. I'd quit smoking a year ago.

I told the police I'd committed a murder. They gave me a little trouble when I wouldn't tell them who the victim was, but I couldn't—not for three to six hours.

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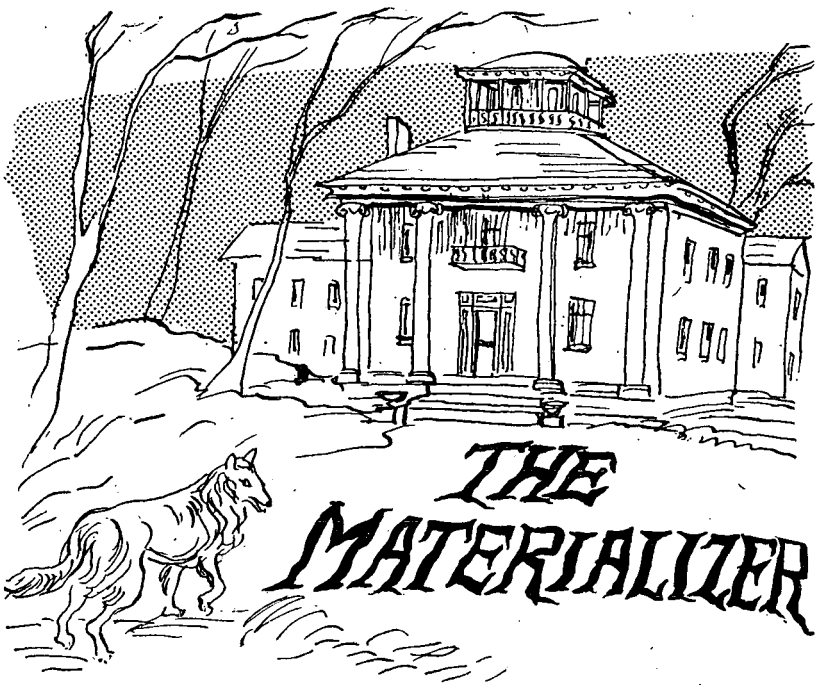
In a situation that tries a man's soul, it is ofttimes a dictate of wisdom not to lead events but to follow them.



THE MATERIALIZER

KRANTZ? KRANTZ? There ain't nobody named Krantz around here." The woman brushed a limp length of dull brown from her round, curiosity-filled face. "I lived here twenty year and never heard tell of any Dr. Krantz. You must of come up the wrong holler. This is Parkins' Holler."

Edmund Raley thanked her with a faint smile, then walked carefully back down the wet board steps that led to a dirt road set ten feet lower than the narrow, wooden porch. Climbing into his car which, by now, was generously speckled with mud from numerous dirt-roaded West Virginia hollows, he

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started the motor. His clothes were damp from the April drizzle, making his trouser legs feel like giant suction cups against his thighs. The feeling of desperation that had been growing within him for two weeks, deepened. Since early morning he had been searching for an enormous old brick house in which he had spent a night, almost a year ago, and lived through the most incredible experience of his thirty-two years.

"I think it's time we drove back to Ohio," said the pretty, quiet-faced woman sitting on the right side of the front seat.

He raised one hand in a placating gesture toward her and she shrank against the car door.

"Laura," he said. "I've *got* to find that old guy. He's the only one

by Emily V. Norton

who can make things right between us again."

His wife shook her head and sunlight danced across her high cheekbones. Her velvety brown eyes were empty of warmth as she turned to look at him. "After jostling me over these horrible roads most of the day, the least you can do is explain why this Dr. Krantz could have anything to do with the way I feel about you."

Switching off the motor, he gazed at her with his wide face stiff from misery. Finally, he shrugged. "All right. What have I got to lose? You can't feel any worse toward me than you do now. I'll tell you the whole story. I know you'll find it unbelievable, but let

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me finish before you decide I'm completely insane."

Laura nodded and interest stirred in her face, dissipating the wooden expression she had reserved for him the last several days.

"You remember," Edmund said, "last May I went to see Bob Mason because you were worried about me. He said the same thing you had; that it looked like I'd been burning the candle at both ends. I asked him if he had any kind of drug that would cure me of hate."

Beside him, a quick intake of breath deepened the natural pinkish tint of his face.

"Yes," he went on without looking at her, "it was your poor mother. Try to see it through my eyes. Before your dad was killed, the Edmund Raley family was a near-perfect example of a happy way to live. We were a man and woman deeply in love with each other, and very proud parents of a beautiful little seven-year-old girl and a fine, sturdy five-year-old boy. We had sufficient money and a comfortable home. We had plenty of time for doing things together." He took a deep breath. "Into this ideal-like situation comes a lovely little bird of a woman who never stops chirping and taking pecks at all those in the house, constantly belittling, demanding and complaining. To top it all, she had developed a heart condition and couldn't be crossed. So I stand aside, watching my wife lose her gayety and once more become a quiet, ever-attentive drudge of a daughter, as she had been before her marriage. In two years my hate grew to a horrible heavy pain in my chest, and I felt as though I were being eaten from within. So that," Edmund turned his head slightly toward her, "was why I could not eat, sleep or sell houses."

"Just get on with it." Laura's voice was rough with resentment. "I know Dr. Mason prescribed a two-week walking tour (of all things!) and even gave you a map of one he had taken a couple of years before because of a near-breakdown. I also know you were gone only nine days and came back looking ten years younger. Get on about this Dr. Krantz."

So Edmund tried to tell her. However, the account which came haltingly from him was only a bare outline of what really happened.

Actually, he thought he had made a wrong turn that May evening, and he sat down on a big, moss-covered rock to check Bob Mason's hand-drawn map. He was supposed to be close to a place called Cottle's Farm where Doc had spent *his* seventh night. He was bone-weary and his feet felt double in size. The now-familiar

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tightness in his chest had not lessened its hold. The sun was going behind a hill to the west, and the valley's coolness began to bite into his flannel shirt, which was clammy from perspiration. He sighed and stretched, slipping off his knapsack and bedroll. He estimated that the small town in which he had spent the preceding night was only about thirty miles away, but he'd "had it" for now. It looked as though he'd have to bed down in the open.

Bird sounds were beginning to take on a subdued note, forecasting the sundown. Hunger crawled across his stomach and he had begun to open his knapsack when he heard a faint whine. A beautiful big collie had appeared on the bank of the little creek a few feet below, and was staring at him. It was an overall bronze color except for a triangle of white on its throat.

"Hello, boy," Edmund ventured. "You live near here?"

The dog barked once and his tail moved politely, but he stood his ground.

"You wouldn't, by any chance, belong to a family named Cottle, would you?" Edmund made his tone conversational and the collie cocked his silken head, regarding him unblinkingly. Then, with another soft whine, he whirled about and disappeared with the stream's curve to the east. Slowly, Edmund gathered his gear and followed him around the thickly-wooded creek bank.

Several hundred yards in front of him was a broad clearing that held a huge, rambling house. Edmund's interest sharpened as he neared the old place. It was of dark, century-weathered stone with a wide, stone porch and steps that were edge-crumbling. The high-up trim was peeling in grayish curls, but four large pillars, the front door and its ornate cupola were bright white, their surfaces appearing blurred and bulged from numberless coats of paint.

A hundred feet in front of the house, a narrow, rutted road ended in the clear little creek, then extended northward around the hill towering closely behind the house. Built against the hill, south of the house, was a large, ugly cinder-block structure.

The collie sat on a lower step watching Edmund approach. He gave three sharp neutral barks and the front door opened. A bent little man stepped out. He had long, sparse, white hair and was dressed in a neat, gray business suit. Edmund heard him speak to the dog in a high, quick voice.

"Well, Plato, you're announcing a visitor. Welcome the weary traveler."

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Plato walked the few yards to meet Edmund and fell in beside him, his tail wagging.

"I'm Dr. Carl Krantz," the old man said, holding out a long-fingered, bony hand. His heavy, dark-gray eyebrows lifted, and Edmund was aware of a pinpointing gleam from a pool of bright blue behind the thick eyeglasses.

"I'm glad to know you, Doctor." He was surprised at the coldness of the dry hand he clasped. "I'm Edmund Raley."

"Come and refresh yourself, Mr. Raley, before we sit down to Mrs. Casto's excellent chicken and dumplings." With a brisk gesture, the old man preceded Edmund into the house.

A long, wide hallway, thickly carpeted and full of shadows, extended back to a scuffed door. Dr. Krantz reached to the wall at his right and a high chandelier flashed into brilliance. He chuckled. "I see you didn't expect electricity. We have our own little power plant." He motioned toward the broad sweep of curving, carpeted stairs, saying, "Frederick will show you to your room."

Edmund looked up to see a big man walking down toward them. He moved with an odd, heavy grace and the stairs groaned beneath his weight. His heavy-jowled face was weathered and deeply lined, but soft-looking with composure. As he nodded courteously at Dr. Krantz's instructions, light danced across the bald surface of his head. He reached for the foot-traveler's heavy pack and turned back up the stairway.

The room into which Edmund was led was old-fashioned, clean comfort. Here, too, protesting floorboards were muffled by thick, aged carpeting, once rich, deep red, now dimly so. The dark, massive furniture created a somber atmosphere, but the bed stood plump, smooth and inviting beneath its brightly-checkered quilt.

Frederick's voice was softly gruff. "You can wash up in the next door to the left," he said. "My missus won't have dinner for another half hour or so."

A short time later, Dr. Krantz greeted him from a deep, overstuffed chair across the large livingroom.

"Ah, Mr. Raley. I've been sitting here wondering what manner of nomad you might be. Indulge an old man and let me see how near I can come to the truth from merely seeing you for a brief moment and exchanging bare pleasantries."

Edmund lowered himself into another deep chair and turned his warm smile toward the old man. "And I've been wondering about you and this wonderful old house

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stuck on a little dirt road miles from nowhere. I'm beginning to feel like I'm in a particularly interesting dream."

Dr. Krantz cackled with delight. "Of course, of course," he said briskly. "But first let me play my game. We don't have guests often, and though Mr. and Mrs. Casto are old and valued friends, we have little new to talk about." He leaned deeper into the chair, pursing his thin lips and touching his fingertips together. Then with a quick swivel of his thin neck, he directed the penetrating blue gleam at his guest. "At first, I imagined you might be a writer in search of book material. There is an alertness in your eyes that seems to be cataloging details. But after looking a bit deeper, I don't believe that's the reason for your foot travel. Besides," he added, "I noted a pipe in your pocket, but no pencil or notebook bulging there."

Edmund nodded. "I'm no writer."

The old man held up a hand. "Don't tell me. Don't tell me. Not yet." He pursed his lips again, hesitating. "You are in the early thirties—that thatch of sandy hair has not begun to thin. You have been athletic—your musculature is good—though you're under six feet and it probably wasn't basketball. You're not burly enough for a football player; tennis, perhaps baseball or track. Since your remark about the house, I'd say you have to do with them, building or selling." He smiled at Edmund's expression of surprise and held up a quieting hand once more. "You're a family man. Patience sits across your broad brow and in the deep blueness of your eyes with their surrounding crow's-feet. However, something is eating you from within. Your motion toward your chest indicates a disturbing sensation of some sort. Since you give an overall appearance of excellent health, I suspect there's been a tragedy in your personal life. Often, a wanderer is running from something: himself, the law or another person. You do not have the wariness of the law-evader. How am I doing so far?"

The smile left Edmund's face. The heaviness in his chest coagulated into a weight pressing against his lungs. "You're very close, Doctor." His words came out lacking breath. "I am in real estate, a family man and played college baseball. I suppose I *am* running—under doctor's orders—from myself, or maybe I could say from another person." He had a quick, clarion picture of Mrs. Cameron smiling archly at him, her high, musical voice dripping with sweetness. "Edmund is such a *devoted*

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family man, Laura, we mustn't expect him to be the dragon-killer type to make a million."

If she only knew, Edmund thought, how like a fire-breathing, menacing dragon she had become in his eyes, and how many ways he had thought of getting rid of her!

"Ah," Dr. Krantz's voice came to him, "I have a nose for such things. It isn't fear as I first thought. The odor of hate comes from you. Yes," he answered Edmund's startled look. "Hate has a fire and brimstone smell—acrid and putrid." He waved his hand. "Don't be embarrassed, Mr. Raley, not everyone can detect it. Fate has brought you here, for I may be able to extract this hate from you."

"Extract it!" Edmund's laugh was bitter. "You mean exorcise it, don't you?"

"No, no, no." The little old man shook his head violently. "Ah, here's the good Mrs. Casto. We'll discuss it after dinner."

The sight of her standing in a starched, blue cotton dress and crisp, bright-white apron—tantalizing food odors seeming to emanate from her very person—recalled Edmund to his now-bottomless hunger. He went eagerly into the big, ornately-chandeliered room. The furniture was all solid, glowing cherry. The tablecloth appeared blindingly white beneath the display of light bulbs. Incongruously, the table was set family-style: thick tumblers full of milk, large, white, dime-store bowls piled with steaming food, and plates of the same cheap chinaware. The pieces of silverware, smooth and glistening, were the only items "at home" in the fading but impressive grandeur of the big room. There were four places set. Mrs. Casto discarded her apron and she and Frederick, after he had seated the old man, took their places at the table. During dinner, conversation was scant, consisting mainly of simple, sincere compliments about the food. Over apple pie and coffee, a few family statistics were exchanged (the Castos had one son and three granddaughters) and then Mrs. Casto redonned her apron before she and her husband began carrying dishes from the table.

"Well, Mr. Raley," said Dr. Krantz, getting to his feet, "if we are able to walk after that meal, I'd like to show you my laboratory. It's there I can explain," he grinned wickedly, "the extraction we were talking about."

Edmund smiled. "I'm game, sir. If it isn't too far away."

"Oh, it's in the basement," his host said and moved quickly to the door leading to the hall, his high cackle streaming out behind him.

The basement laboratory was im-

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mense. Edmund stood at the bottom of a long flight of wooden steps and stared about him in utter amazement. There was a chaotic conglomeration of laboratory tables full of wires, glass and copper tubing, beakers and flasks; panels of levers and wheels; boxes of all shapes and sizes holding dials and needles; and an intricate network, high and low, of wiring and tubing. One wall was lined with six-foot, glassed cabinets, and one corner of the laboratory held a huge metal cube about five feet high. It sprouted a maze of wiring that led to two great clumsy hulks of apparatus.

"Well? Well?" Dr. Krantz crowed. "What do you think of it, eh?"

"It looks," Edmund realized aloud, "like Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory—only more so."

"Ah," said the old man. He pursed his lips and looked pleased. "But I don't make monsters here. On the contrary, in some instances, I slay them." He motioned to Edmund. "Come, Mr. Raley, let me show you some fruits of my labors. When my biography is written, I shall be called 'The Man Who Could Materialize Anything'."

Edmund followed him across the concrete floor, gently shaking his head in an attempt to dispel the dreamlike haze which swam across his mind, entrancing him.

"In this cabinet," the doctor said, opening a door, "are the results of my first experiments in materializing sounds. Most of them were of such small amounts of matter that I have them on slides. They can be seen plainly through the microscope set on low power. However, here is a fat man's booming laugh." Grinning, he handed Edmund a small vial. On its bottom, a tiny, bright-red bead glowed. It rolled easily when the bottle was tilted.

Irrepressibly, Edmund smiled. "It looks like a miniature gelatin capsule."

Dr. Krantz nodded violently, his white hair waving in gossamer wisps. "Yes," he said. "My colleagues accused me of concocting—" His sharp cheekbones began to flush. "But I won't go into that. The imbeciles destroyed many of my original specimens under the guise of analyzing their chemical content." He gestured to the row of vials before them. "If you'd like, examine them. They're all labeled. Please don't uncap them. Some are many years old, and I can't chance exposing them to air. The next shelf is odors. Most of them are sealed on slides, as you can see. There's a microscope there, too, for viewing."

Pulling a high, wooden stool noisily across the cement floor, he

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perched on it. Then he fixed his piercing gaze on Edmund's hands and poised as though for instant action.

As he examined vial after vial, slide after slide, Edmund's head cleared. He found that there were color-shades he had never seen, and the myriad crystalline patterns were so finely and intricately etched beneath his eyes that he felt like a clumsy giant peering into fairy dells.

"The sounds," he murmured finally, "appear as though they are just about to burst into life, into movement. The odors all have an oily look."

"Ah," Dr. Krantz said, "you are not a nonbeliever. Now we come to my most recent efforts, the materialization of emotions. My problem has been securing donors. The human animal contains complex mixtures of ever-changing emotions. When a strong, sustaining emotion dominates a person's consciousness, the individual's body normally gives it up out of sheer fatigue. Otherwise, the person becomes physically or mentally ill. You, my friend, are being what is called 'eaten up with hate'. I believe I can extract this hate."

Surely the man is mad, Edmund thought. But madman or genius, he felt compelled to hear the old man out. A great weariness was beginning to overtake him, and he spoke to hurry his host. "And have you? Have you been able to materialize any emotions?"

Once more Dr. Krantz pursed his lips and placed his long fingers together. "Yes, but only two of any consequence." Darting to another cabinet, he returned with two vials. "This," he said, handing one to his guest, "is envy. My good friend, Frederick, was sorely troubled with it."

Holding it up, Edmund saw a fat, half-moon drop of dark, oily green move sluggishly on the bottom of the little bottle. He shivered. The doctor exchanged vials with him.

"Here is a big dose of fear," he said. "I expected it to be yellow, but it came out almost clear, with only a brownish tinge. It's a free-flowing substance. It came from a doctor who had made a mistake. A little girl died because of it." A note of persuasion crept into his high, quick voice. "Neither of my donors had any adverse effects from the extraction, Mr. Raley. Are you interested in seeing how it's done?"

"Well . . ." Edmund hesitated. "Yes, I *am* interested but—"

"Just a dry run, my friend, just a dry run." The old man waved his bony hand and led the way to the large, boxlike enclosure in the cor-

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ner. "I realize you're near exhaustion, so I won't keep you long."

The outer wall of the box was hinged at midpoint and the little man swung it open. He pressed a switch on the inside and bright light revealed what appeared to be a barber's chair with a great variety of wires and tubes attached. Long, fat straps of shiny material were fixed at numerous locations.

"Here," said Dr. Krantz briskly, "sit down and I'll show you how the attachments adjust. It's really very comfortable."

Edmund lowered himself into the chair, trying to restrain a grin. "It's really something," he said, and relaxed against a padded back.

"These straps on the arms go across the lower forearm—so," his host murmured, fixing them in place. "This broad one comes across the chest and these fit the lower legs." He reached back of the chair, adjusting a headrest, and brought a thick, cool, padded strap across Edmund's forehead. "There." He stepped back. "You see, quite comfortable, isn't it?"

"Yes," Edmund answered with a sigh, feeling tautness drain from his muscles. Then he caught sight of the expression on his host's wrinkled face. It was full of unholy glee, and the younger man realized he was caught like a fly in a web.

"Unstrap me, please." He strained against the headrest.

Dr. Krantz cackled. He spoke soothingly. "Don't worry, my young friend, you're perfectly safe. You're very tired. Just relax a moment." Then he left the box, closing the door behind him.

Edmund felt rising panic but decided against yelling. Almost immediately, the bright lighting became a soft glow of changing colors and he heard a little hissing sound. It was followed by a cloud of mist that came down from above his range of vision. He was conscious of a strange, not unpleasant odor very much like damp earth. Then he heard a voice coming from beside him.

"I can speak to you from out here, Mr. Raley. Directly in front of you is a small revolving wheel of colored light. Keep your eyes on that, relax and listen to me. I want you to think about this hate that is destroying you and breaking up your home. Don't be angry at me. Forget me. I only want to help you."

Edmund considered. What did he have to lose? Even if the old nut killed him, at least he'd be done with it. Dr. Krantz's voice became a softly urgent, hypnotic croon. Conscious of its sound but not its words, Edmund deliberately began to think of his mother-in-

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law: a once-beautiful little woman turned to artificial sourness, her heavily made-up mouth constantly moving in simpering, exaggerated motions, her starkly penciled eyebrows writhing above her bright eyes. Around her, no innocent morsel of conversation was safe from ridicule. He recalled Laura saying, "Lisa, darling, let's wash your hair now," and Mrs. Cameron with her usual, "It's a shame our little girl doesn't have beautiful hair like her Aunt Carman did. A rotten shame she takes her looks after Daddy, isn't it!" Wounding one person a sentence was not her way. Double-barreled belittlement was. His head became a huge, pulsating hum and beneath the chair straps his skin caught fire. The painful tightness in his chest grew to a searing fury centered in his solar plexus. Closing his lids against the revolving wheel which was now an eye-stinging, angry red, he opened his mouth to scream. Then he was falling slowly, freely, painlessly.

He awoke to the early-morning chirpings of the birds. Conscious of a deep softness beneath his body, he stretched luxuriously, breathing deeply of fresh, moist air. As the day lightened and the bird sounds increased in volume, his eyes caught splashes of color and his mind snapped to attention. The checkered quilt told him where he was and he sat up quickly, remembering. That nutty scientist must have hypnotized him! The tightness in his chest was gone and he felt wonderfully rested.

Lying back down against the soft feathers, he grinned. Whatever the old man had done, he was grateful. He lay in a state of blissful half-sleep until the odor of fresh coffee and bacon reopened his eyes. Almost simultaneously, the squawks of stair-boards preceded Frederick's appearance at the bedroom door.

"Good morning," the big man said. "Breakfast is almost ready if you'd like to join us, Mr. Raley."

Edmund thanked him and, finding his outer clothes neatly folded on a chair, dressed hurriedly to join his host.

Once more Dr. Krantz greeted him from the livingroom. "I hope you slept well, my young friend."

"I did, indeed," Edmund said. "I don't remember going to bed, though."

"Oh," Dr. Krantz chuckled. "Frederick helped you. He didn't try to lift your 180 pounds, but he steered you there. You were practically unconscious from exhaustion."

Edmund looked straight into the sharp, blue eyes. "I don't know how you did it, Doctor, but I feel

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like a man released from Hades. Thank you."

"The thanks are a two-way street, Mr. Raley." The old man's eyes gleamed with excitement. "I extracted the best specimen yet." Rising, he held out a vial. "This is only half of it," he said. "That was a big dose of hate."

Edmund took the little bottle. Seemingly glued at its bottom was a tiny, flattened, black blob with minute spikes arising from its surface. As he examined it closely, however, he was aware that the spikes were a dark red aura emanating from the blob. Involuntarily, he shuddered and offered his host the vial.

"No," Dr. Krantz shook his head. "You keep that one. When a man of your caliber is driven to such desperation, the cause should be exterminated. If hate begins to build up again—" he gestured and chuckled, "drop it in her coffee."

"Why, Dr. Krantz!" Edmund was shaken out of his cocoon of composure. "I'm not the exterminator type!"

The old man's face fell into hard, bitter lines. "You think not? Don't delude yourself, my boy." The wicked grin split his face again. "But you may find you have a completely different attitude toward the horrible woman and kill her with kindness instead. Keep the specimen, however, keep it."

So Edmund had dropped the vial into his jacket pocket.

Now, almost a year later, he looked at his wife hopefully.

"It was so wonderful to feel human again. All I was interested in was finding a highway so I could get back to you and the kids. I forgot the darned vial—just pushed it back in the desk drawer and forgot it! Two weeks ago when I walked in and saw you in the process of uncapping it, I nearly fainted with shock."

"You yelled loud enough," Laura said, her voice throaty with disapproval. "I think that's why *I* fainted. I hadn't heard you raise your voice since Mother died at Christmastime." She shivered. "And there was the most horrible stench!"

"I know," her husband said. "It was that thick, dark-red mist that puffed up into your face." He looked away, biting his wide, lower lip. "And all you'd say when you came to was, 'Don't touch me!' Laura, my darling, don't you see? It's poisoned you, somehow, and made you hate me."

"I do have that tightness in my chest," she said, her dark eyes thoughtful. "And my whole body crawls when you touch me. But Dr. Mason says it's nerves." She

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turned suddenly. "Did you tell *him* about your experience?"

"Yes, when I first came back from the trip. He just laughed. He said he'd never heard of a Dr. Krantz and I must have been hypnotized by an expert." Edmund shook his head. "But it's odd. Dr. Krantz mentioned that the specimen of fear came from a doctor who had made a mistake. It crossed my mind later that it could have been Bob's. Remember the Steward child that died on the table shortly before Bob took his walking trip?"

"Well," Laura shrugged, "it's all too fantastic, and I can't think it has anything to do with the way I feel about you." Her pretty face wrinkled with puzzlement. "It's queer, I can't remember loving you at all." She turned to him and narrowed her eyes. "But don't forget, I've done what you asked and come on this ridiculous trip. You agreed not to fight the divorce if I did."

"Yes," Edmund said, wearily. As he reached for the car key, he looked up. At that moment, he saw a beautiful collie come around the bend of the road, wading the swollen creek. It was a soft bronze color with a triangular white patch on its throat. He walked toward their car, his feathery tail waving in a friendly, dignified way. Nearing the car, he sat down and regarded them unblinkingly.

Edmund's heart began to pound. He poked his face upward out of the car window. The round-faced woman was sitting on the top step looking down at them.

"I beg your pardon," he called. "Is that your dog?"

"Naw," she answered. "That's the Cottles' dog. He lives on around the bend—past where the road ends in the creek."

"Laura," Edmund was breathing heavily. "It's Plato. I'm sure it is. Come on, let's follow him." He got out of the car, and the dog promptly turned and began trotting up the road, pausing only to look back before entering the creek.

"Come on, Laura, please," Edmund called, his voice trembling.

Laura shook her own bronze-colored head in a motion of disgust, but she opened the car door and followed her husband and the beautiful collie.

The woman on the step looked after them, her eyes wide with curiosity and her mouth hanging stupidly open.

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Perfect vision is sometimes no help for characteristic blindness.

SONNY CRABTREE made his way carefully along the narrow ice-coated walk leading to the Van Raalte cottage. The night was cold and studded with frozen stars. There was no moon. The snow that covered the neat little yard looked gray in the dark. On either side of the Van Raalte cottage were others, a dozen others, all identical and all identically quiet. The only sign of life was an oblong of incandescence to the right of each door where the livingroom was and where respectable people, at this time of night, were watching the after-dinner movie on television.

But if one were to believe what one read in the papers (and Sonny Crabtree at 22 was prejudicially skeptical), Mrs. Van Raalte was not watching or reading anything. Listening was all—to the radio, perhaps.

He clumped with deliberate noise up the three wooden steps and across the porch. He wanted the listening Mrs. Van Raalte to hear him. She might not be inclined to open the door to a quiet stranger these days, alone as she was and presumably helpless,

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whereas an unknown bumbler who loudly advertised his approach might be almost welcome.

The doorbell posed as a brass knocker in the guise of a bulldog's head. Sonny raised the muzzle. Four chiming notes floated faintly around inside. Then a frosted light went on over his head, and his shadow suddenly leaned out of joint across the porch railing and fell flat and black against the gray snow.

Presently the door opened and Mrs. Van Raalte, hardly five feet high, was focusing on him from glasses so dark that the eyes behind them were invisible. Her fragile face was wrinkled and very white. "Who is it?" she asked in a meager voice.

"Name's Dave Grover," Sonny Crabtree said. "I'm a newspaper reporter, ma'am."

"Well, good evening, but I think you're at the wrong door."

"I don't think so, ma'am. Your name's Van Raalte, ain't it?—Isn't it, I mean?"

"That's right, young man. But I stopped being newsworthy weeks ago."

"Then you didn't look at the six o'clock news tonight on TV."

"I don't *look* at anything anymore. Not in the usual sense."

"That's right. I keep forgetting. Anyhow, the big thing on the news tonight was about that cop, the one at the bank. He died late this afternoon."

"Officer Hart is dead?" She seemed genuinely surprised, so far as Sonny could tell.

"Died in a coma. Never come out of it even once, they say."

"Heartbreaking," Mrs. Van Raalte said. "To fight so hard for life and then to lose after six long weeks. His poor wife. His poor little children."

"Too bad, yeah. But that's why I'm here, ma'am—to get a final interview with the only eyewitness to the shooting."

"I see. So callous, you reporters, all of you. Besides, I can hardly be considered an eyewitness any longer. Not now."

"That's an angle I kind of want to cover, ma'am, if it's all right with you. It'll take only a few minutes."

"Well, come in if you must. It's your job, I suppose. You said Mister Grover?"

"Correct. Dave Grover." From his topcoat pocket Sonny took the press card he had snaffled a few nights earlier from the real Dave Grover in Billy Bean's Bar & Grill. "And here's my credentials to prove it."

Just for a moment the dark glasses appeared to scan the card in Sonny's hand—or so he thought—

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but before he could be certain, Mrs. Van Raalte said, "I must take you at your word, Mister Grover. I'm unable to distinguish credentials from a laundry list."

He stepped inside. She closed the door and walked to a chair near an old cabinet-type phonograph and sat down. "Try the couch," she said. "You'll find it comfortable."

"Okay," Sonny said, but he remained standing. "Nice place you got here. Cozy."

"Lonely. I'm going to sell it. I've been saying that ever since my husband died, but now I mean it. I can't really afford to keep a house. And with my sight gone, well, it's impossible."

"You might be in line for a lot of dough," Sonny said, surveying the livingroom inch by inch as if looking for something of value, something that could be hocked. "Yeah, a real lot of dough, ma'am."

"What do you mean?"

"The Police Benevolent Association put up a reward tonight. Ten thousand bucks for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the man who murdered the cop."

"I'm afraid I can't help them."

"What if you get your sight back? Ain't there—isn't there a chance?"

"None."

"I thought in the beginning some doctor said in the papers that you had a fifty-fifty chance of seeing again." He noticed a woman's wristwatch on the mantelpiece and began to move toward it. "What happened to change the odds?"

"The doctor who made the statement was not a specialist," Mrs. Van Raalte said. "Before I left the hospital I was examined by a reputable ophthalmologist."

Big word for eye doc, Sonny guessed. "So he shortened the odds," he said, appraising the wristwatch with a petty thief's eye.

"Prognosis negative, as they say."

Swiss make, Sonny noted. Platinum finish. No initials, which always helps the fence price. Worth maybe two bills. Eddie Naye might give twenty-five bucks for it. "But you say you got a good look at this guy who shot the cop."

"A very good look. I made myself look hard."

"Why?" On the mantelpiece not far from the wristwatch was a tidy bit of dough: two finifs and four singles topped by three quarters. Attached to the bills by paper clip was a yellow piece of paper. Sonny inspected it. A dry-cleaning invoice for shampooing a rug—$14.75. "Why'd you take such a hard look?"

"I wanted to remember." Her thin voice was tense. "I thought of

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my husband and I was determined to remember."

"Hey, that's right. Your old man got killed in a stickup a few years back."

"Your choice of words leaves much to be desired," Mrs. Van Raalte said. "But yes, my husband was gunned down by some thug who was robbing a liquor store. It was our forty-second wedding anniversary. He went to the store for a bottle of champagne. And the holdup was in progress."

"And the heister panicked. It happens."

"It happens too often nowadays."

"He loses control of the scene," Sonny said as if explaining the simple arithmetic of life. "He don't mean to pull the trigger. It ain't part of the plan. The gun goes off by itself, like."

"He shot the store owner through the head," Mrs. Van Raalte said. "The man died in the very act of handing over the money from the cash register. When the police arrived the bills were scattered all over the floor behind the counter."

"Yeah," Sonny said, remembering something else and feeling a chill crawl up his spine. That was the way it had been that morning in the branch bank. Things suddenly went out of control.

"He shot Walter in the stomach," Mrs. Van Raalte continued, her small voice vibrating like a steel thread. "The poor dear didn't die till the next day. He was conscious for several hours, and in terrible pain, but he was unable to describe the man who shot him. Under the most normal circumstances Walter was never very observant of people—the little details like how tall they were or how heavy or what they were wearing or the color of their eyes or hair."

"And you, ma'am—you notice things like that?" He hadn't been wearing a hat that morning, just a black bandana over his nose and mouth.

"I'm normally observant—or was, up to then."

This old dame was enough to give a guy the creeps. Why had she appeared on this first and only bank job, screwing up the works, making him lose control? "So you got a good look at this holdup man, I guess."

"Yes, I did. When I walked into the bank he was wearing a black handkerchief over the lower part of his face."

"How come you were at the bank so early? Ten of nine. It wasn't even supposed to be open." He had cased it. He knew the manager and the woman teller arrived at 8:45. He'd been waiting outside hunched down in his car,

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masked. This was the big time—bank robbery. Until then he'd been playing it small and safe—shoplifting, a couple of cars, rolling drunks, sticking up a guy and a chick making out in the back seat of a car parked near the city dump. Never arrested. Never even questioned. No record.

"I had my pension check," the old dame was saying. "I was going to cash it in the drugstore. They charge a dime for the service. But as I passed the bank window I saw somebody inside—the robber, as it turned out—and I tried the door and it was open . . ."

All for a lousy dime, Sonny thought. He had forced the manager and the teller to lie face down on the floor after they brought the money drawers from the vault. He was just beginning to stuff the currency into a briefcase when . . .

". . . I was almost up to the counter before I realized that I was interrupting a robbery," Mrs. Van Raalte said. "I thought immediately of my husband. And I made up my mind then and there that I would be able to identify *this* particular hoodlum if the time ever came."

"What did he look like?" Sonny asked, fascinated.

"I've gone over it a dozen times with the police. I suppose once more won't hurt. He was tall, about six feet, and young—I'd say around twenty-two or three."

"Lots of tall young guys around," Sonny said as he'd said to himself the day the description was published in the newspapers.

"He was unusually thin, skinny's more like it, with very blond eyebrows and light-colored hair. His hair was longish, not like the hippies, but longer than usual and he combed it to the side with a part on the right."

Weird what this little old lady latched onto, Sonny thought, running a hand for reassurance through his close-cropped blond hair.

"He had extremely blue eyes," she said.

"Blue-eyed blond guys are a drug on the market," Sonny said.

"He was wearing a tan corduroy jacket over a short-sleeved blue sport shirt. I know it was a short-sleeved shirt because when he came around the counter aiming the gun at me, the sleeve of the jacket rode up his right arm a few inches above the wrist. I saw a tattoo there. Three letters. They looked like C's but they may have been O's."

CCC, Sonny mused. Calvin Craig Crabtree. Good thing he had no record. With the old lady's description the fuzz would have had him jugged within an hour.

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"You sure had good eyesight when you had it," Sonny said. "What else you notice?"

"A number of things. The papers printed every last detail all over the state. I understand your own paper, The Post Herald, reproduced on the front page an artist's concept of the gunman."

"Yeah, that's right."

"But what sticks clearly in my mind right now is my first glimpse of Officer Hart. He came strolling by the bank windows. It was a fine crisp morning. He looked so happy. His lips were pursed and I suppose he was whistling a tune. Then he glanced inside . . ."

That's how it was, all right, Sonny thought. Dumb cop barges in, ruins everything. Reaches for his damned gun, the dummy. So what do you do? Fire in self-defense is all, and keep firing until the gun is empty. Never fired a gun before that morning. Missed the cop most of the time, but then suddenly he fell down and got off a couple of wild shots. The cop wasn't such a helluva good marksman himself, lying on his belly, but he managed to hit the old lady somewhere in the head and blind her. That's a hotshot cop for you.

". . . and now he's dead," the old woman was saying.

"And you're blind," Sonny said, taking a boy scout knife from the pocket of the corduroy jacket that he'd dyed from tan to blue.

"And the killer is still at large," the old woman said, looking blindly in his direction through the dark glasses.

"That's the way it goes." He pulled out the main blade of the knife. It was honed sharp as a straight razor used daily. In fact, he'd shaved himself a couple of times with it, just for fun. It gave you a close shave. Which proved a private point: you don't need those big fancy switchblades for a job. If you know where to cut, and surprise is on your side, all you need is a good sharp boy scout knife. The fuzz don't even consider it a weapon.

Walking on the balls of his feet, Sonny slowly approached Mrs. Van Raalte. She seemed to follow him impassively through the opaque lenses. A clock's distant ticking penetrated the sudden silence. When he was within two feet of the sitting woman, Sonny raised the knife and made three swift passes within inches of her face and throat. She did not wince. She kept staring straight ahead at his belt buckle. She was blind, all right. He was sure of that now. He took a few steps backward.

"I don't think I've given you much of a story," she said.

"You give me what I wanted,"

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Sonny said. He walked to the mantelpiece and quietly removed the wristwatch and the rug-cleaning money. "I'm much obliged, ma'am."

"Well, you're certainly welcome, Mister Grover."

"Don't bother getting up. I'll let myself out."

He walked quickly down the quiet street and across to the next one. His car was parked in front of a vacant lot in the shadow of a poplar tree. As he slid into the dark interior, something began to nag at him. He fished in his topcoat pocket for the car keys. Dave Grover's press card was there too. Inserting a key in the ignition, he switched on the map light and studied the card for perhaps a minute before he realized what was wrong. It read *David W. Grover* with the number *16* under the name and under that was an inch-square full-face snapshot of the reporter and across the bottom of the card, in the bold block style used as the paper's logotype trademark, was *The Post Herald.*

With the same sense of panic that he'd felt in the bank six weeks ago, Sonny heard Mrs. Van Raalte's recent words charging through the corridors of his brain. *Your own paper,* The Post Herald, *reproduced an artist's concept . . . Your own paper,* The Post Herald, *reproduced an . . .*

He hadn't mentioned *The Post Herald* once. He'd merely said he was a newspaper reporter named Dave Grover, and displayed the press card to test the police story about her blindness. And she'd read it! The tricky little biddy had read it and then, accidentally, let the cat out of the bag. He'd just been too blind himself to see it at the time.

He pushed open the car door and got out. He had to get her before she got him. He began to jog up the residential street. It was only a block and a half to the Van Raalte cottage, but by the time he reached the front door each gulp of cold air burned like fire in his lungs. He lifted the bulldog knocker. The chimes sounded. The porch light overhead came on. Then, one by one, all the lights in the house went on, throwing bright rectangles across the gray snow.

Sonny pounded furiously at the door.

Then he heard the sirens, many sirens, come wailing through the cold night.

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The fox, it is said, has many tricks, and the hedgehog only one, but that is the best of all.

The Search For Mr. Delilah

THE TELEGRAM had been slipped under my office door while I was having my mid-morning coffee break, but since telegrams come rather frequently to Toby Dunn, investigator, one more was no cause for concern. The return address was the Cypress Grove Hospital and Rest Home in San Francisco. I've been to Frisco a lot of times and I've never even heard of

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the place. The message caught me below the belt:

Monte Duggan expired here. As next of kin what disposition do you wish to make of the body?

It was the first I knew I was Monte's next of kin, but being an orphan, he had to list somebody.

I'd known Monte twelve years. He'd dropped from sight two months earlier while half the lawmen in the northwest were out to nail him on a murder rap. Two girls had been brutally stabbed to death in a dingy apartment house in Portland's hippie community; two sets of bloodied fingerprints were all over the place. One set was still unidentified; the other prints belonged to Monte Duggan. There were none of the sexual overtones usually attendant in such cases. It was strictly the work of a madman, somebody on LSD or something equally insidious, the authorities had decided.

Being Monte's best friend, I was hauled in as soon as the law got a make on the fingerprints. Monte was a coming investigator, so to speak, with his own office across town. He seemed to have a built-in radar, sniffing out the crucial points in a case while the rest of us indulged in footwork and stupid questions. Besides, Monte was damned likable. Being his closest friend, I was the one he would turn to in troublesome times . . .

I stared out across the sun-splashed rooftops of downtown Portland, remembering the reddish-brown hair, the quizzical blue eyes, the turned-up nose and stubborn chin. Finally I reached for my hat, and was locking the door behind me when heavy footsteps sounded on the creaky floor of the hallway. The newcomer was built like a fullback and weighed a good two hundred and twenty-five pounds. His nose was bent permanently to the south and he had hands the size of small hams. Even from a distance he smelled like a cop. As a matter of fact, in certain unsavory circles, his name was anathema: Drummer Klotzky.

"Pretty early to be locking up for the day, Shamus," Drummer said in his resonant baritone.

I shrugged indifferently. "That's the nice part about having an office stuck away in a back hall between an import-export firm and a quack chiropractor. Nobody notices when

by George Grover Kipps

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you close shop. As if they'd care."

"I noticed," Drummer pointed out. "Any particular reason for calling it a day so early, or do you actually have a client waiting?"

"Boredom," I lied. "Lots of boredom and no business."

Drummer silently extended a copy of my telegram. "I just got some of the same no-business, Shamus." He studied me a minute. "Come on, I'm buying." He led the way to the ancient elevator and, when we reached ground level, around the corner to a smoky little tavern adorned with Japanese fishing floats and pieces of fishnet. "Anything you'd like to tell me?" he asked as our second drink arrived.

"What's to tell?" I grunted sourly, my unseeing eyes on the floor. "Monte Duggan was wanted by the authorities for questioning in a double murder. Now Monte Duggan is dead. End of story; end of long, sordid story."

"I heard he had a lot of promise as a shamus," Drummer volunteered. "You help him when he made a run for it?"

I sipped my bourbon. "Not so you could make a case out of it. I knew I couldn't find Monte if he didn't want me to, so I left some money in a few of our favorite bars, just in case. Monte collected on two of them before he cut out."

Klotzky sipped his drink. "At least you're truthful. I was one step behind you the night you were spreading the loot. I never suspected at the time that Monte was one step behind me, picking it up. By the time I got the picture, he was off and running. It still amazes me that he managed to outwit all the law in the country for two whole months. Could be it was the blow to my pride. I am a cop."

"He wasn't guilty," I said grimly. "I'm sometimes wrong about a man but never as wrong as some people said I was about Monte."

"You never said why he was spooking the weirdos in the first place," Drummer hinted. "What was he doing in gooney gulch when the two girls were murdered?"

I stretched my six-foot frame out in the chair and let my number tens protrude beyond the far side of the table. "He was looking for somebody's daughter, a girl named Barbara. I never did learn her last name. I was considering looking him up when your people put out the APB on him as a murder suspect. I heard from him just once after he cut out; a postcard mailed in Kansas City and sent to my sister's house out on Marine Drive. He said his man had moved on and he was going after him. I imagine he

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was referring to the real murderer."

Klotzky turned his glass meditatively on the wet tabletop. "You're probably right. The prints on the murder weapon weren't Monte's. Still, he'd left a lot of his own. You'll be going to San Francisco, of course."

"Tonight," I said. "After all, I've got a body to claim. I always claim my bodies at night."

Drummer rose with a heavy sigh. "Keep in touch, Shamus." He moved out the door, head bowed in deep thought.

Flight 212 put me in Frisco at six-forty that evening. With a rental car for transportation, I set out in search of the Cypress Grove Hospital and Rest Home. It was so far out of town it was almost out of the county. I'd called ahead and Dr. Humboldt, the man who'd sent me the telegram, was waiting. After expressing his sympathies, he led the way down a set of concrete steps and along a gloomy corridor.

One thing had been puzzling me. "How come you people ended up with the body? Rather unusual procedure, isn't it?"

The doctor flipped a light switch beside a green door. "Being the nearest facility, it was only natural they call us. Our ambulance was called out again immediately after the fire, so the body was left here. After the official autopsy, the authorities could see no reason for moving it. They did ask that I notify them when you arrived."

I nodded understandingly. "Naturally."

The doctor scanned a sheet of paper on the desk, then crossed the room to three shrouded tables and drew back the sheet on the center one. My throat bloated with revulsion and I almost lost my dinner. Nobody had said how Monte had died, and I hadn't bothered to ask. He was dead, that was enough. How he'd died hadn't seemed important. The hands were charred crisps of nothing, like bacon left too long on a roaring fire. Both hair and beard had been fused into a crust by the extreme heat. The body gave off a stench that set my teeth on edge.

The doctor indicated a hole at the bottom center of the rib cage. "That was the cause of death. The burns were made afterward." He drew the sheet over the grotesque sight. "We made tentative identification from the wallet found beside the body. Had it not been for that, he would have been shipped to the county cemetery and an unmarked grave. A dental check showed perfect teeth; no cavities, no fillings. Very unusual. As you can see, any other form of identification is well-nigh impossible."

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I still didn't have a clear picture of the scene in my mind. "Where did the death and fire occur?"

Dr. Humboldt pointed vaguely to the south. "About five miles back in the hills in a deserted mansion. A pity. It was quite a showplace, so I've been told. The authorities deduced that the fire was deliberately set with kerosine. There were signs the place had been lived in recently, but there was no water available and it burned to the ground before any kind of an investigation could be made."

Back in the office, I studied the identification report I was to sign. "Two months of living like an animal on the run can change a man a lot, Doctor. However, all indications are that the dead man is Monte Duggan. He's the right size and shape, brownish-red hair, sandy beard and blue eyes. That, plus the wallet identification, seems to pretty well cinch it. Besides, the bully boys seem to think it's Monte, and who am I to go against official presumption?"

I was affixing my signature to the form when two plainclothesmen entered the office. One was middle-aged and small. The other was around thirty, and built for playing basketball. The older man displayed a badge. "Toby Dunn?"

I nodded. "I'm Toby Dunn. Is this a pinch of a poor mourner?"

The detective shook his head. "No pinch. I'm Lieutenant Deskin." He hooked a thumb toward the string bean. "This is Sergeant Barnes. This being a homicide, we'd like to ask you a few questions. You don't have to answer them but we'd appreciate it if you would."

I fell into step with Deskin and we moved out the door and into the muggy California night. "You knew Monte Duggan a long time," he said.

I fumbled a cigarette out of my pocket. "Ten . . . twelve years."

"Any ideas on how he got mixed up in that double killing in Portland?" I continued walking in silence but the detective persisted. "You were his best friend, knew him better than anybody else. It figures you've got an opinion."

I halted beside the police car. In the distance the lights of San Francisco licked at the night. "No opinions, Lieutenant. No suggestions, no theories, no nothing. What else did Klotzky tell you?"

"Klotzky?"

"Yeah, Klotzky. You must remember Drummer Klotzky. He's the only one who knew I was coming down here to claim Monte's body, and with two unsolved murders on his hands he still has a stake in the case. It figures he's the

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one who filled in all of you boys."

A faint grin played around Deskin's mouth. "He told us you were nobody's fool. You can follow us downtown. We've got Duggan's personal effects at the station house. They're all yours, for whatever they're worth."

An hour later I sat at the desk in my hotel room and studied the odds and ends that comprised the estate of the late Monte Duggan. There was some small change, a penknife, a key ring and a pair of red dice. Sight of the gaming cubes brought on a wash of memories. Monte had always been ready to take a gamble. It was the other things that spilled from the big manila envelope that really intrigued me, though; a replica of a wooden spigot, such as were used to tap kegs years ago, a miniature key patterned after some medieval original, three one-inch-high silver bottles, and a minute corkscrew. With the exception of the spigot, they were all the sort of things a girl would wear on a charm bracelet—and they all leaned toward wine-making . . .

It was almost midnight when I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my eyes, and from that particular angle the letters PW appeared faintly on the side of the spigot. As a beginning it was slim. In fact it was almost nothing, but it was all I had, and it did give me an idea. I downed a stiff shot of bourbon and crawled into bed.

When the general library opened the next morning I was waiting on the steps. I collected all the back-issues of magazines on wines and wineries and began reading. I didn't really expect to hit pay dirt, but I hadn't been able to conjure up a better idea. At noon I took a pair of magazines with me and headed for a nearby diner. They were both a waste of time. After lunch I returned to the library and began reading again. It was almost three o'clock and my head was beginning to throb when I found what I was looking for. The article was a year old. Going to the newspaper section, I dug out the same story in the *Examiner* and collected more of the details.

Lt. Deskin and Sgt. Barnes were waiting in their car at the curb when I moved down the library steps. Deskin silently motioned me into the back seat. "Going in for culture, Dunn?"

I slouched back against the cushion. "Didn't Klotzky tell you? I've been a nut for the classics since way back. Art, music, literature, I go for the whole package. I've even been known to appreciate the symmetry of a beautiful broad or a well-filled bottle."

"Why don't you can the funny

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stuff?" Deskin snapped. "You're up to something. We know it and you know that we know it. Why not level with us?"

"Maybe later," I said. "After I've done some checking here and there. Like I said last night, I'll be in touch."

"Just watch where you step," the older detective warned as I eased out of the car. "You might get in touch with the hereafter."

The Pellegrini Winery lay moldering in the sultry moonlight like a small ghost town. The dozen buildings, erected by the Pellegrini brothers umpteen years earlier, were darkened and forbidding. According to the article in the *Examiner*, the business had gone into receivership and was now tied up in a squabble among the heirs. It was the only winery, deserted and isolated, in three counties. After a thirty-mile drive I'd come to a locked gate with a court order tacked to it. I'd walked the remaining two miles and taken up a position on a hillside overlooking the Pellegrini holdings. I'd intended to crawl all through the place but a trail leading into the south end of the valley had shown signs of recent heavy traffic. Shortly after dark the murmur of voices drifted up to me, and then heavy breathing as the night creatures passed close by on the trail leading up to the civilization they had spurned.

"Wait up, Daddio," a feminine voice panted. "These rocks are murder on bare feet."

"Be quiet, dammit," a masculine voice hissed furtively. "Keep yapping like that and you'll have the lousy fuzz down on us. Remember the cause, Baby."

After a brief period of silence a train whistled hauntingly in the distance. Then the silence returned.

The cause, I thought. *Iconoclasts and flowers; hopheads and beads . . . the cause . . .* Like one hundred and ninety-nine million others, I'd never understood it, but being on the downwind side of the trail, I was certain of one thing. The cause had nothing to do with soap and water.

Using my pocket flashlight, I moved down the trail. It led under the mesh wire fence and up to the largest building, in the center of the complex. The doors were locked, but the trail led past them and ended below a chest-high window at the end of the building. On the inside, a short ladder leaned against the wall to make the coming and going a bit easier. I crawled through the opening and played my lights over the great wine vats. They were a full twelve feet high and twenty feet long, with a ladder leading to the top of each one.

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I was moving ahead when the faint sound of voices drifted through the darkness. I froze. Then I spotted the weak splash of orange light flickering against the rafters. It was coming from the open hatch atop one of the vats. The smell of burning hemp reached my nostrils as I eased to the top of the ladder. Inside, slouched against the side of the vat, were two men and a girl. One man was blond and bearded, the other blackheaded and bearded. Both were smoking.

"We'd better make a check of the grounds," Blackbeard grunted nervously. "Samson will raise hell if we let anybody slip in here. That deal at the old mansion the other day got him all shook up."

The blond giggled stupidly and waved his arms. "Samson can't fly, but I can fly. Watch me fly over Samson."

The girl, a glassy-eyed brunette, stared unseeing at the opposite side of the vat. She wasn't smoking. Her petrified state came from something else. When Blackbeard gave up trying to get the blond to accompany him, and moved toward the ladder leading up to the hatch, I backed down hurriedly and stepped into the opening between the end of the vat and the wall. Seconds later he passed within a few feet of me and moved away toward the window at the end of the building. I waited until he returned and then began inspecting the different vats. They were all the same: dirty clothes, moldy bedding, the reek of unwashed bodies and the rancid stink of spoiled food.

Man, imbued with compassion, had passed laws making it a crime to treat animals in such a fashion, and now man, in his inimitable wisdom, was doing the same thing to himself.

The corner vat was considerably more posh than the others. A crossbar held an assortment of vests, all made from animal skins. There were cases of cigarettes, booze, hams, and other delicacies. There was also a large box of marijuana, along with some small bottles of clear liquid and a half dozen boxes of sugar cubes. I wrapped one of the bottles in my handkerchief, slipped it into my pocket, then eased out the window and back to my vigil on the hillside. I don't know how long I sat there. It seemed like a week. I'd just dozed off when the wail of a distant train jarred me awake. A half hour later the tide of human flotsam washed down the trail. In the lead, his face held up to the pinking sky, strode a hulking brute in a leopard-skin vest. Hacked-off blue jeans and moccasins completed his attire. On

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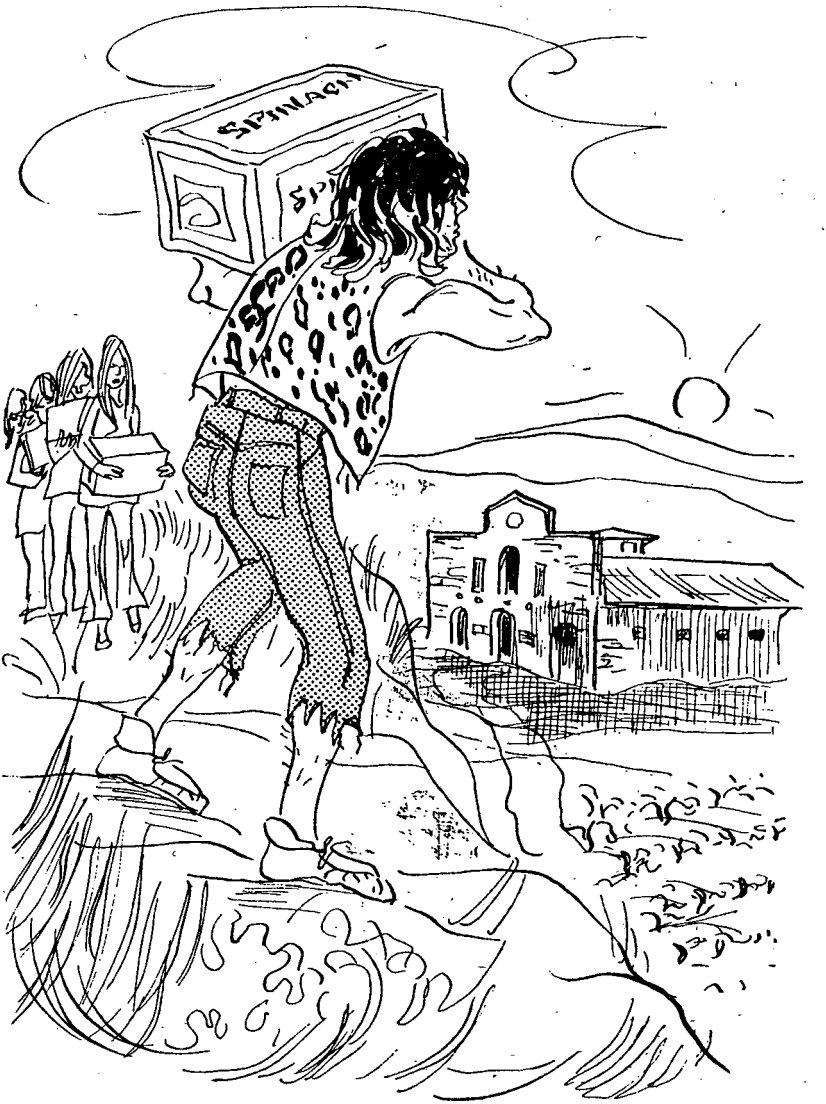

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his shoulder he carried the night's plunder, a case of spinach; soul food for the faithful.

Samson, purveyor of pot, LSD, and goofy-woofys of all makes and models . . . Samson, high priest of degradation and insanity . . . His subjects followed obediently in his wake, virtually all of them carrying some form of plunder.

By the time I'd walked the two miles back to my car, and then driven through thirty miles of traffic to my hotel, I was beat. I'd been on my feet over twenty-four hours, the last twelve without eating. I ordered a double order of ham and eggs sent up to the room and then headed for the shower. I was toweled dry and standing in the middle of the room in my shorts when a knock sounded at the door. I reached for my robe. "Bring it in. The door's unlocked."

The chow was on a standard waiter's cart, but behind the cart was a very un-standard waiter: Drummer Klotzky. He flashed a wry grin. "Morning, Shamus. I brought an order for me, too. I have a thing about eating breakfast alone in a strange town."

"What in hell are you doin' in Frisco?" I grunted.

Drummer found a chair and bellied up to the steaming goodies. "The commissioner got to thinking about some of the cute curves you've thrown in the past, and since he doesn't like insomnia, he thought maybe I should drop down here and keep an eye on things."

For a minute I teetered on the edge of a lascivious suggestion. Then I brought my temper under control. "I suppose, just to add insult to injury, I also bought your breakfast."

"You're a helluva good supposer," Drummer said nonchalantly. "And why not? After all, you've got a credit card, and I'm an old-fashioned slob with nothing but folding stuff."

Drummer must have been up all night too, because he polished off a prodigious stack of flapjacks and eight sausages without a pause. When he'd reached his coffee and the inevitable stick of chewing gum, he focused his eyes on me. "You doin' any good yet?"

I shrugged. "I think I've spotted my man, and I know where he hangs his beads."

Drummer belched genteelly. "You could avail yourself of my unparalleled services, you know. "I've been known to come up with some rather startling innovations from time to time."

I couldn't hold my eyes open any longer. "I liked you better when you were with the combo working your way through school, Drum-

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mer. At least then you were entertaining." I handed him the bottle I'd lifted from Samson's kennel. "Have this checked out, for both fingerprints and contents."

Drummer paused at the door, his hand on the knob. "In case you should decide to need me, I'm next door, in 607."

"Next door?" I was getting punchier by the minute.

Klotzky nodded and grinned. "When I found out where you were staying, I moved in. The commissioner will love me for it."

Right then I wouldn't have cared if Jack-the-Ripper had been next door honing his knife. I fell in the general direction of the bed and conked out for a good ten hours.

When I woke up it was late afternoon. Propping myself up on the pillows, I went over the situation with a cigarette and a slug of bourbon. So far I'd hit it real lucky, but things happen that way sometimes. The big thing now . . . was Samson my man? From what I'd seen and heard out at the winery, I was ready to bet the chunk he was. I showered and dressed and banged on Drummer's door, but he wasn't in. The desk clerk said he'd been out all day.

The weather had cooled a bit, so I began meandering toward the glittering fantasy called Chinatown. I do my best thinking when I'm walking. I had the feeling in the back of my mind that I'd missed something, but for the life of me I couldn't pin it down. I was admiring a fiery-mouthed dragon painted on the window of a cafe when it clicked. The teeth . . . the teeth . . . I found a phone and dialed the number of the Cypress Grove Hospital and Rest Home.

"I've been trying to reach you," Dr. Humboldt said. "You left last night without making any arrangements for the body."

"It's the body I'm calling about," I said. "Are you absolutely certain the teeth had no caps or fillings?"

"Beyond any doubt," the doctor said. "A perfect set of teeth is so rare we were all quite impressed."

"Hold the body, Doctor," I said. "I'll be in touch."

I moved back up the street, trying to fit the information into the picture. I was almost to the corner, ready to cross the street to my hotel, when I spotted Deskin and Barnes moving into the lobby as though they were going to a fire. Drummer Klotzky was right behind them.

I wheeled around and headed back up the street at a fast walk. A block away I found a phone booth and put in a call to my own room. Deskin's raspy voice grated against my eardrum. "Room 609. Who's

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calling?" He sounded unhappy.

"It's me, Lieutenant," I purred. "Toby Dunn. Put Drummer on the line."

"Where are you?" Deskin snapped. "And how did you know I was here?"

"I didn't call up to play twenty questions," I growled. "Now put Drummer on the line and make it snappy. If you don't, I'm going to cut out and give you the damnedest chase you ever got in on."

A gurgling sound came over the phone, and then Drummer's deep baritone. "What's up, Shamus?"

I knew that Deskin was having the call traced, so I didn't waste time. "I'll tell you later, Drummer. Leave the hotel by the west entrance, turn right when you reach the street, and keep walking. Somewhere along the street I'll contact you. And, Drummer, come alone. If I spot anybody who even looks like he knows a cop coming along behind you, I'm long gone." I hung up before Drummer could reply.

He came along the street five minutes later. Down the street, the car containing the two detectives headed in the opposite direction. I waited till Drummer was abreast of me, then lit a cigarette. He stepped into the darkened doorway beside me and exhaled noisily. "After that, I need a drink. Deskin and Barnes both had smoke coming out their ears, but I managed to convince them that if they interfered you'd blow the case, but good. They didn't like it but they had to buy it. I'm supposed to check back in with them real quick. Barnes even suggested I belt you in the jaw and bring you back with me."

We moved a half block up the street to a tavern. "The prints on the bottle must have struck a nerve."

Drummer nodded. "That's putting it mildly. They matched the unidentified set found with Monte's at the murder scene—which makes you the only man on earth who can point out the slob who wears them." A sudden thought caused Drummer to eye me critically. "You do know who they belong to?"

I sipped a cold beer. "I'm reasonably certain I know, and scooping him up will pose no great problems. But that's just half the package. The thing now is, how do I locate Monte Duggan?"

"Locate Monte?" Drummer's eyes widened. "You mean that isn't him on the slab out at the Cypress Grove Hospital?"

I shook my head. "I thought it was at first. The guy was almost a dead ringer for Monte. That and Monte's wallet fooled me. The

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singed hair and beard didn't help any either. The truth of the matter lay in the teeth. The body has a perfect set, and Monte had two molars capped up in Seattle right after a barroom ruckus about four months ago."

Drummer nibbled thoughtfully at his lower lip. "The way he's been outrunning all the law in the country, getting in touch with him just might run into quite a chore."

"Negative," I said. "Chasing him doesn't get it. Too many cops have tried that and failed. I've got to bring Monte to me. And I've got an idea that's just crazy enough to work." I outlined the deal to Klotzky. "Tell Deskin and Barnes if they'll play it my way, I'll lead them to the killer. We meet right here at noon tomorrow. That gives them hours to get ready."

I was standing on the curb at twenty to twelve when the two detectives pulled up in a gleaming fastback. Drummer was sitting in back. The car had two bright red stripes straddling the hood ornament and going back over the roof and down to the rear bumper. You could pass a hundred cars and forget them. This one you'd remember, red on black, real flashy. Barnes glared down at the case of beer and sack of sandwiches at my feet, but I ignored him and passed them in to Drummer. Barnes leaned forward so I could get into the back seat with Drummer.

Deskin swiveled around angrily. "Okay, we bought it. But we still haven't figured out why it should take twenty cops and six paddy wagons. You'd better know what you're doing."

"Start driving," I said. "There are fifty or sixty hippie-type characters holed up in the vat room of the old Pellegrini Winery. The killer is a big blond slob called Sāmson. Maybe there are others there just as bad. It's highly possible. Samson will be inside the vat in the southeast corner of the building. Your best bet is to move in fast and quietly, and surround the place before they know you're there. If they make it to the brush and caves in the hills around the place, a hundred men couldn't flush them out in a month."

Barnes eased out of the car, walked back and held a brief talk with the four men in the car behind us. He returned within a minute. "Let's go."

The raid on the winery was swift and thorough. Not a man—or woman—made it to the fence. A guard had been posted but he never woke up in time to do his cronies any good. Samson lost a lot of his arrogance as he stood with his hands shackled behind him and watched the lawmen load his booty

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and contraband into one of the paddy wagons.

"Now what?" Drummer asked as the last vehicle pulled away and we were alone.

"We wait," I said, handing him a cold beer. I'd parked the flashy car—one just like mine—so that anybody in the surrounding hills would be able to see it. "Monte's out there somewhere. He's followed Samson too far to give up now. Sooner or later he'll look down here and see a familiar car with a familiar license plate. At least I hope the painted-over plates fool him. Then he should recognize my ugly puss. In the meantime we sit and wait."

The sky was cloudless, the sun brassy. It was almost six o'clock when Drummer nudged me. We were sitting on the ground on the shady side of the car. "You hear that?"

I nodded. "I heard it. He's coming through the hole in the fence at the upper end of the yard." I rose slowly, leaned against the hood and let a long swallow of beer cascade over my tonsils.

"Don't drink it all, you ornery devil," Monte called happily. He shuffled down the slope, then halted suddenly as his eyes found Drummer. For a minute I thought he was going to bolt. Instead, he nodded and grinned. "Hi, Drummer. Still pulling surprises."

Klotzky extended a cold beer, one of the few remaining. "Sit down and tell us about it."

Monte sagged cross-legged to the ground. He was nut-brown and stubble-chinned. "It was a real weirdy, all the way." He downed a long swallow of beer. "I was looking for a girl named Barbara in the hippie colony when some of them invited me in for a drink. It was plain orange so I never gave it a thought. It was a big mistake, real big. Just like that, I was on a trip. I remember Samson screaming about jezebels and harlots, and swinging a pair of scissors like a maniac. Then I was bending over the bodies of two girls, and dabbing my hands in the blood . . . so I could paint a temple for Samson." Monte shuddered. "I guess I smeared gore all over the place, and laughed like a complete nut while I did it. The next thing I remember was waking up in some bushes on Vista Ridge. I could hear the sirens and see the police cars in the distance. Then it hit me, the lousy spot I was in. Samson had already cut out, and I knew I had to follow him. As soon as it got dark I slipped into town and picked up some money at a couple bars. Then there was another blank spot, a real blackout. I woke up on a grain barge at The Dalles. For some reason, I had to

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get to Cleveland. Don't ask me why. It was probably something I saw or heard when I was in orbit. It was a rough trip too, boxcars and cold chow all the way. From Cleveland the trail led back to Kansas City and then here."

I handed Monte a salami sandwich. "Who's the guy the law dragged out of the burning mansion about three miles over the hill?"

Monte washed down a bite of the sandwich. "Beats me. I was holed up there and snooping around here at night to see if Samson were really here. Then the creep the cops found in the fire slipped in on me and tried to hang his knife in me. In the fight, he either fell on it or I shoved it into him. I don't remember which. The place was already on fire by then. I barely made it to a tunnel in the basement and out to the gazebo. I've been living in a cave for the last three days." Monte reached for another sandwich. "But how in hell did you figure out I was here?"

I handed him his billfold, along with the odds and ends Deskin had given me. "The billfold said you were in the vicinity of Frisco; the odds and ends suggested a winery. And since this was the only one not in use in a lot of miles . . ."

"I lost the billfold in the fight," Monte said. "But this other stuff I've never seen before. Probably something the creep picked up in one of the buildings. It looks like souvenir stuff. I'm sure glad it appealed to him."

Drummer rose and stared around at the haze-shrouded hills. "We'd better be getting back to town. I've got to put in a call to Portland. Besides, the newsboys will be all through taking pictures of Samson and they'll be wanting to interview Mr. Delilah here."

"Mr. Delilah?" I asked. Then it clicked and I started to laugh.

"'Tain't funny," Monte growled.

"You'd better get used to it anyway," Drummer chuckled. "After all, you are the guy who brought about the downfall of Samson."

We crawled into the car and headed for town.

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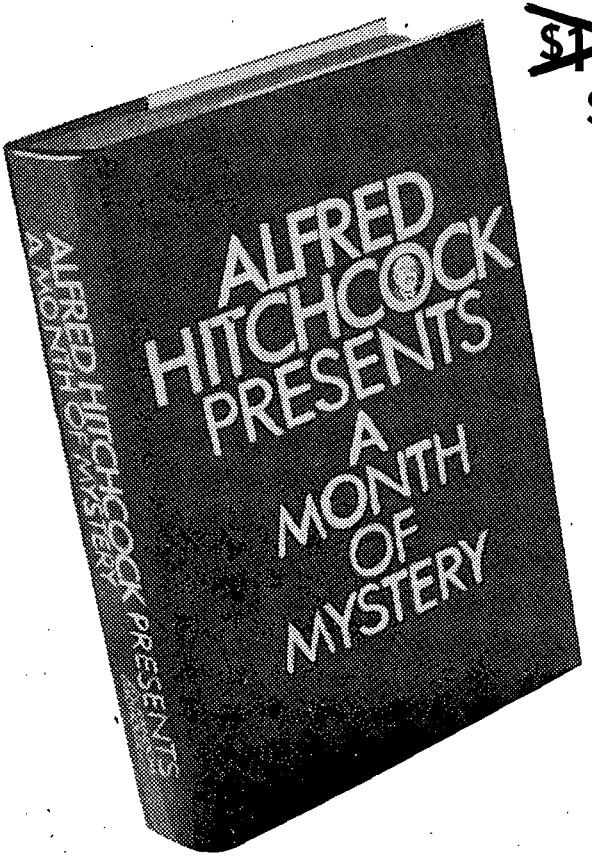

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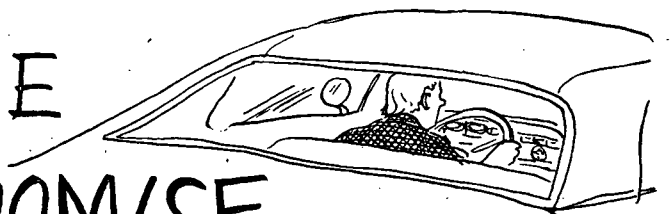
Moderation is said to be the silken string running through the pearl chain of all virtues.

THE PROMISE



by Marilyn Granbeck

HERBIE LOVED THE CAR. With a car like this, he could go anywhere. With a car like this, no one would laugh at him. The boys on the street would stop talking, and look at him. Even the girls would want to know him.

He hunched over the wheel, his eyes intent on a spot just beyond the smooth curve of the hood. His foot pressed the accelerator, and he let his eyes flick across the instrument panel for an instant. Deep in his throat he made a rumbling sound to imitate the engine of the big car. Joy raced through him.

Vroom! Herbie heard the roar of the exhaust as he gunned the motor. This car could make him free! This car could take him—

"Herbie!"

He yanked his foot from the gas pedal and slammed it on the brake, then focused his eyes on the garage wall directly in front of him until his stepfather spoke again.

"Get out!" Steve jerked the car door and motioned angrily. His face was red, and Herbie knew Steve was mad. He stepped out onto the garage floor. He looked down, trying to wish himself someplace else, anyplace where he wouldn't have to listen to Steve yell at him.

"How many times have I told you to stay away from that car? I warned you last time. *Stay away*

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from my car, I said. You told me you understood, didn't you?"

Herbie nodded. He had understood, too. He'd meant it when he promised not to play in the car, but somehow he forgot again. He didn't want to make Steve angry or see the hurt look on Momma's face. More than anything, Herbie wanted everyone to be happy.

Steve slammed the car door. "You and your promises! I should have known better than to believe you'd remember." He pulled open the basement door and shoved Herbie up the stairs ahead of him. "Upstairs! We're going to settle this once and for all."

Herbie stumbled and almost fell. He grabbed the rail, hoping Steve wouldn't notice and start yelling about how clumsy he was. It was just that when he got nervous, things seemed to go wrong.

"Upstairs," Steve ordered again.

Herbie concentrated on his feet. *Please,* he begged his body, *don't be clumsy.*

In the kitchen, Momma turned from the stove and smiled at him. He forgot about Steve for a second and felt warm and comfortable in his mother's love. Steve closed the basement door and came to stand next to him. The pleasant feeling disappeared, and Herbie felt heavy and cold.

"Grace, we have to talk."

Momma's smile faded. She looked at Herbie, then at Steve, and back at Herbie again. Herbie wanted to reach out and touch her to make her smile again, but he didn't dare. He stood very still and waited.

"He was in the car again, Grace. After all the promises." Steve frowned at her.

Momma didn't take her eyes from Herbie.

"I've had it," Steve said in an ugly voice. "When I married you I said I'd try living with him around. I've tried for three months now, and it doesn't work. I can't stay in the same house with this—overgrown moron!"

Momma's face went white. "How can you be so cruel?"

"You're the one that's being cruel," Steve shouted. "Herbie should be put— He should be with his own kind."

Herbie's stomach tightened to a hard knot. He wanted to put his hands in his pockets, but his fingers felt big and clumsy and wouldn't find the openings.

Momma looked like she was going to cry. "Herbie, please go to your room. I'll come in a little while."

Herbie started to obey, but Steve grabbed his arm. "Let him stay. He's got to know sooner or later."

"I don't want to talk about it in

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front of him," Momma said. "You know how it upsets him."

"What about the way he upsets me?" Steve demanded. "Do you care about that? I've told him time after time to stay away from that car, but it doesn't sink through that thick skull of his."

"Steve!"

"Face the truth, Grace. Herbie has the body of a man of twenty but the mind of a five-year-old kid —and not a very bright one at that. He should have been sent away years ago. Everyone would have been better off."

Tears were running down his mother's cheeks now, and Herbie felt somehow it was his fault because he forgot about the car.

"Steve, please. Let me talk to him. I think I can make him understand. I'll watch him so he doesn't play in the car again." She wiped at the tears quickly. "I'll keep the garage locked."

Steve shook his head, but Momma went on. "Please? Give him another chance. You know I can't send him away."

"You said the same thing last week. I gave him a chance, and it didn't work. It's no use, Grace. He's got to go."

"Please? It isn't as though he hurts anything. I mean, he just sits in the car and pretends."

Steve's face got red again. "That car is mine," he said. "I don't want him touching it!"

"I'll watch him. I'll make him understand and promise—"

"I promise," Herbie said quickly.

Steve didn't seem to believe him, so Herbie repeated his offer. "I promise, Steve. I won't forget again, honest." He wanted Steve to be happy. The room was quiet for a long time. Herbie held his breath and waited.

Finally Steve said, "Okay, but this is really the last time. Understand? The last time. If that— If Herbie touches my car again, he goes or I go." He turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Herbie let his breath out. Momma must have been holding her breath, too, because he heard it escape like a small gust of wind against a window screen.

"Herbie, do you really understand?" she asked. "Steve was very angry. You mustn't touch the car, ever again."

"I just sat in it, Momma. I didn't break anything."

"I know, dear, but you mustn't ever go in the garage again. You don't want to make Steve angry, do you?"

Herbie shook his head. So many things made Steve angry, but the car was the worst, he knew that. This time he wouldn't forget.

For three days Herbie remem-

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bered. Each morning Momma reminded him about the car before he went outside. She told him again at lunch and again at supper. Every time Herbie passed the locked garage he remembered his promise.

On Saturday, Momma was talking on the telephone when Herbie finished his breakfast. He carefully scraped the bread crusts and a few crisp edges of fried egg into the garbage and placed the dirty dishes in the sink. Then he put on his heavy jacket, zipping it carefully, and pulled the hood over his ears. He went out the back door.

The air was cold and felt stiff as he breathed it. He walked around the block, counting the cracks in the sidewalk. They zigged and zagged or cut across the cement in straight lines, and they reminded him of the maze of wires under the hood of Steve's car. He got mixed up when he got to fifteen, but it didn't matter. He just began again.

Once he stopped to look into a yard where a cat huddled on a step. She looked cold, and Herbie wanted to pick her up and slip her inside his jacket to warm her, but the cat stared at him with eyes that seemed to go right through him. Somehow they reminded him of Steve's eyes when he was angry, and Herbie hurried home.

Herbie stopped in front of the big garage door. From inside, he heard the running motor and the clink of Steve's tools, but the garage door wasn't locked. Instead of touching the driveway, it was open a few inches, resting on a large hose. Herbie knew it shouldn't be under the door that way. Steve would get mad at Momma if he knew she forgot about keeping the door locked, so Herbie carefully slipped his fingers through the handle and lifted. With his shoe he kicked the hose until it disappeared behind the edge of the door. Then he let the big door down gently. It made only a tiny noise as the lock clicked into place.

Herbie stood up and smiled. Now Steve wouldn't get mad at Momma. Herbie had remembered. He went to his room and looked at his collection of stones for a long time. They were pretty, some round and smooth, others rough and sharp. Herbie thought they were like people—some scowling and angry, their sharp edges ready to slash him. He set these in the bottom of the box. Gradually he covered them with the happy rocks that curved into smiles.

When he heard Momma call, he pushed the box back into the closet and went downstairs. The table was set for lunch.

"Herbie, will you please go downstairs and tell Steve that

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lunch is ready and on the table?"

Herbie frowned. "I don't want him to get mad at me. I haven't gone near the car at all, honest."

Momma patted his arm. "All right," she said softly. "I'll go." She started down the stairs and Herbie followed her. He stayed in the doorway when she opened the garage door. The air smelled warm and dry, almost sweet.

"Lunch is ready, Steve," she called.

There was no answer except the steady throb of the engine. Herbie saw Steve bent over the motor under the open hood, but he wasn't working. A wrench lay on the fender just beyond his fingertips and his other hand dangled loosely.

"Steve!" Momma screamed, and she ran around the car and grabbed Steve's shoulder. He slid sideways, and Herbie saw his face. It was dark red—redder than Herbie had ever seen it before.

Herbie backed out of the doorway. Steve was mad because he'd come down here. But he hadn't touched the car! He'd kept his promise!

Herbie heard his mother moving quickly in the garage. The engine stopped and she came back to the basement door, holding the piece of hose in her hand. Her eyes filled with tears.

"I didn't go in, honest. Tell Steve I didn't go in."

"Herbie—"

"Don't let him be mad, Momma. I closed the door so he wouldn't get mad. I remembered. Tell him I remembered." Herbie's hands felt cold and his legs shook.

Tears ran down Momma's cheeks as she took his hand and started up the stairs. Her voice sounded hollow when she spoke. "Steve isn't mad at you. He's . . . Steve won't get mad anymore, Herbie."

Herbie looked at her. He didn't understand.

His mother blinked at the tears and said, "Steve's . . . going away."

Herbie still didn't understand, but he believed her. He thought about his stepfather going away. "Will he take the car?" he asked.

She shook her head and pressed her hand against her mouth. She told Herbie to sit on a chair, and she picked up the telephone.

Herbie waited until she hung up before he spoke again. "Momma, if Steve doesn't take the car, will I be able to play in it now?"

Momma didn't answer because she was crying again.

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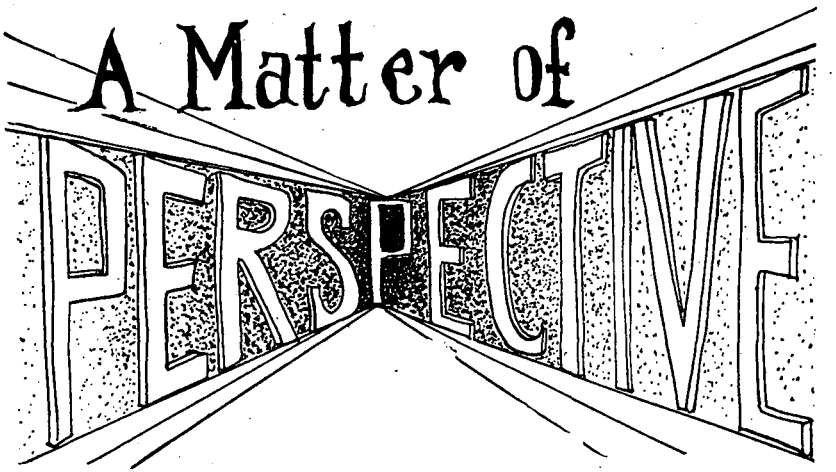
There is, apparently, more than alliterative affinity between perspective and perceptive discernment.



WHEN THE CAR wouldn't start and I had to run to catch the crowded train, I knew it was going to be one of those days.

Landers caught me hurrying through the building lobby and pushed the morning newspaper under my nose. "You must help me, Stoneman," he said belligerently.

"If you're soliciting funds for some charity, I'll buy the paper," I told him. "No need to be so rough."

His shaking finger poked at the sheet. "What's wrong with them? She couldn't have done it."

I took it from him testily. "It would help to know what you're talking about."

"That story," he said. "Right there, about Marcie."

I scanned the two inches of newsprint. With typical terseness, it said William Kessler, 45, a man with something of a police record, had been found dead in the apartment of a Marcie Gray, 22. A scream in the early morning had brought police to the scene but they were unable to determine the circumstances because the young woman was in a state of shock,

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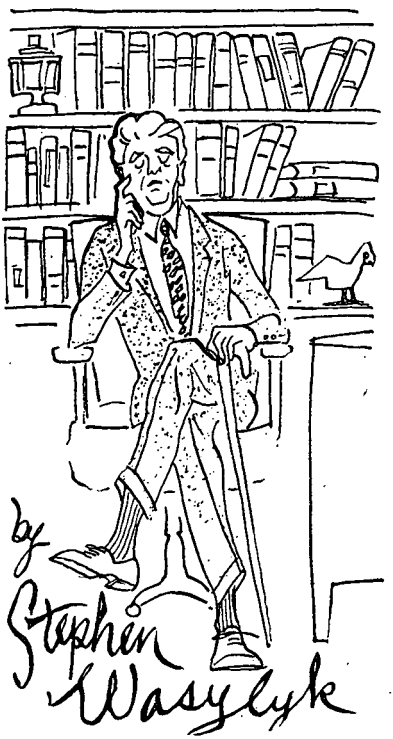
unaware of her surroundings and unable to speak. Police suspected her of the killing.

"Who is Marcie Gray?" I asked Landers.

"My secretary, that's who. She's been in the city for only six



months. A real nice kid. What was the man doing in her apartment?"

"How would I know? Maybe she prefers older men. What do you want me to do?"

"You're a lawyer! Defend her!" he yelled, oblivious of the passing crowd staring at us.

"You should have said that in the first place," I said calmly. "Let's go upstairs and talk to Chetkos."

The old man was in his office. I would have been surprised if he were not. During the twenty years of our association, Martin Chetkos was always first in and last out. The few times he wasn't worried us until we found out why.

I tapped at his door, led Landers in, introduced him and let him explain. I could see the old man evaluating Landers through half-closed eyes, seeing him for what he was, a reasonably good-looking man in his middle thirties, well dressed, in keeping with his position as a rising young executive in an oil company.

Chetkos evidently approved of what he saw. "I would think that Mr. Landers' secretary does need assistance."

"She needs help from someone," said Landers. He slapped the newspaper. "I can't believe this. She's a nice girl. That man probably broke into her apartment."

"The newspaper doesn't say that," I pointed out.

"I don't care what the paper doesn't say," he flared. "She'd never invite a man like that into her apartment."

"You ever been there?"

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"Of course not. Our relationship was strictly business."

"Through your choice or hers?"

"Through mine, I guess. I simply never asked her."

"Then how do you know how she spent her leisure hours?"

"I don't have to know. I know a nice girl when I see one."

Someday he'd find out that many people aren't what they seem, but I wasn't going to try to further his education at the moment.

"Then you really have no way of knowing if she is capable—"

"I know Marcie," he said stubbornly. "Someone else had to be there. Someone else had to kill him."

Chetkos and I looked at each other. It was an interesting theory, anyway. I pointed at the door. "Go to work, Tom. I'll be in touch later."

"You think I can work?"

I grinned. "You can pretend. What I'm trying to tell you in a nice way is to leave us alone. We'll take care of your secretary."

After he had gone, Chetkos smiled. "His interest in his secretary is far too great to be the usual concern. He evidently has a great affection for her."

"And doesn't even realize it. This strange man in her apartment may shake him up a little."

"He would never believe ill of the young woman, no matter why the man was there." He lifted his cane and pointed at the phone. "Your next steps are obvious. First a call to the police and then a visit to Miss Gray. I hope you have nothing on your schedule of greater priority."

"He caught me on a quiet day. I intended to do some research."

"Perhaps I can do it for you."

"It can wait. I would prefer you look up precedents, if you will, that are similar to this case. We should be prepared."

"An excellent idea." He rose and stretched his seventy-year-old muscles. "Are you sure you have no court cases scheduled? I am in a mood to do battle."

I grinned. Some unwary assistant district attorney was lucky today. "Sorry to disappoint you but none of my disreputable friends are in trouble at the moment."

"I hope they are not reforming."

"I doubt it. Even when they get old they won't turn respectable. The police have merely been busy elsewhere."

He sighed. "Unfortunate. Perhaps I should accompany you."

I shook my head. "Please stay here. I'll want your usual detached view. I have the feeling this one is going to stop us both."

He shrugged. "It would not be

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the first time. We are not infallible."

In my office, I dialed headquarters, found out who was in charge of the case and learned Sergeant McMichaels was at Marcie Gray's apartment, only a few blocks away. I stepped out into the coolness of the summer morning, taking long strides, hoping I'd get there before he left.

I needn't have hurried. McMichaels had the age and experience to be thorough in any investigation, and he had a great many more neighbors to interview when I caught up to him.

He flinched in mock horror. "Whatever it is, Stoneman, I'm not buying."

"I'm not selling, Mac. I'm Marcie Gray's attorney and all I want is more than the papers had this morning. Do I get it from you or do I talk to the lieutenant?"

He grinned and sniffed the air. "Luckily it's a nice day. Not too hot, not too cold, and even if I don't know what I'm doing, I'm in a good mood. What do you want to know?"

"The whole pitch. Whatever you know, I want to know."

"I can tell you very quickly. Nothing."

"Nothing? I can't believe that."

"The only one who can tell us is the girl and she can't talk. All I know is, we found her with the dead man and that's about it. We figure she picked him up somewhere and took him home with her. There was an argument, she bashed him with a whiskey bottle, he fell and finished the job by hitting his head on a table on the way down. She screamed and went into shock, probably when she discovered he was dead. I've been canvassing the neighbors, trying to pick up a line on her, but haven't got anywhere. She hasn't been living here long enough."

"The guy didn't break in?"

"No chance. The landlady heard them come home, laughing and giggling, about twelve."

"How about the landlady? They usually know more than anyone else."

"Not this one, although she's the one who called us."

"There's a little doubt about the girl being capable. You considered a jealous boyfriend being there?"

"Are you trying to make trouble for me?" he countered. "There's no reason to think someone else was involved." His eyes narrowed. "You know something I don't?"

I waved away his suspicions. "All I have is someone who insists the girl couldn't have done it because she's not the type."

He grunted. "Didn't know there was a type. Start grabbing without

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permission and some women don't care what they hit you with."

"Maybe, but what *about* boyfriends? Could one have been there?"

If there was, he was invisible. The landlady gave us the names of two she's been seeing regularly. We're trying to track them down now."

I didn't envy him. It was turning out to be one of those cases where you simply plod along, hoping for a break, doing a great deal of hard work and ending with nothing.

"I'd like to hear what the landlady has to say," I told him.

"Right across the street. The brownstone with the red door. Her name is Mrs. Sandler."

She was middle-aged and not very happy about the whole thing. "It had to happen in my house," she said bitterly.

"No one regrets it more than Miss Gray," I soothed. "I'm sure she didn't expect or want anything like this. She bring men to her apartment very often?"

She sniffed. "I'm no housemother. My tenants' business is their own. The only reason I know what time she came home last night was because of the racket they were making."

"Did you hear anyone else come in?"

She shook her head. "That doesn't mean someone couldn't."

"Could someone have been waiting for her?"

"Where? In the hall?"

I threw up my hands. "I don't know. I thought you might have some ideas. If there was no one else here, it means Miss Gray killed him."

"As her lawyer, you'd like somebody else to be here, wouldn't you?"

I smiled. "I certainly would. Wouldn't you?"

Her face softened. "I always thought she was a very nice girl."

I handed her my card. "Other people agree with you. If you think of anything, call me."

I checked the office to find Landers had already called twice, wanting to know what progress we had made. "He can be a trying man," said Chetkos.

"What do you expect from him? Nonchalance? He's not sophisticated enough for that. I'll call him and calm him down."

Landers answered quickly. "There's a detective here, talking to everyone," he said.

"Standard procedure," I told him. "Don't worry about it. Give him all the cooperation he needs."

"Are you accomplishing anything?"

"Not much. Maybe you can help. Miss Gray ever talk about her boy-

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friends to anyone at the office?"

"Some guy named Joe used to call her once in a while."

"Know his last name?"

"Never heard it."

"She have a phone directory or something like that on her desk?"

He sounded horrified. "You want me to go through her personal belongings?"

"Bury your scruples. The girl is suspected of killing a man. Go through her desk and see what you can find that's interesting. I'll call you later."

"Where are you going now?" His voice was suspicious.

"To see your secretary," I snapped. "I've had clients who wouldn't talk but she'll be the first who can't. It will be quite a novelty."

I was directed to a doctor named Kubinsky. He was short, round-faced, with thinning hair, a worried look and half-spectacles that kept slipping down his nose. He pushed them back.

"I don't know how much good an attorney will do in her present state," he said.

"She still has certain rights to be looked after," I told him. "Suppose, for instance, she recovered. Would you have any objections to her talking to the police?"

"Of course not."

"I would," I said grimly. "Remember it. If she should recover, she is to speak to no one unless I am there."

"Not much likelihood of that happening, from all indications."

"Exactly what are the indications?"

"I have so little to work with, I have to say they are not good. I need background on the girl, her personality, her history. I need to talk to someone who knows her well."

"Relatives are usually your best bet."

He sighed. "I believe she has none. Sergeant McMichaels is checking her place of employment for any information they may have, and for close friends."

"I know. Every little bit helps, I suppose, but I have a hunch that all you're going to end up with is the opinion that she is a very nice girl." I told him about Landers.

"Now, there's a man I'd like to talk to," he said. "Working with her each day, he probably knows her as well as anyone."

I thought that Kubinsky didn't know much about the usual relationship between executives and their secretaries but I said nothing.

"Any sign of injury?" I asked.

"Nothing at all. This problem is strictly emotional. She simply couldn't accept the fact the man was dead and closed the door on it.

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In doing so, she locked out everything else. It has happened before."

"Surely there are drugs—" I began.

He held up a hand. "Not unless I know more about her. We'll simply have to be patient, gather as much background as possible, and proceed from that point. Besides, there is always the remote possibility she may recover on her own." He stood up. "Do you wish to see her?"

"Would it do any good?"

"None whatsoever, in my estimation."

"Your judgment is good enough for me." I handed him my card. "I'll tell Mr. Landers to get in touch with you. If McMichaels should turn up with some other people who know her, call me. I insist on being kept up to date at all times."

He nodded. "You are entitled to that courtesy."

As I flagged a cab I remembered telling Chetkos this one was going to stop us both, and as the morning wore on I was becoming more convinced of it. McMichaels would do an adequate job in turning up acquaintances. I decided to approach from another direction. In the office, I scaled my hat into a corner and picked up the phone.

The voice that answered the number I dialed was high-pitched and slurred. "Let me talk to Snuffles Grogan," I said.

A loud sniff told me the moment he picked up the receiver. "Who is it?"

"John Stoneman, Snuffles. I need a rundown on a guy."

"I don't know nothing," he said automatically.

"Kessler," I continued. "The one who was killed last night. What can you give me on him?"

"Small-time. An independent. No connections." The sniff-punctuated voice was guarded, as if he held a hand over the mouthpiece.

"That much I know. I mean his personal life. Women, booze, that sort of thing."

"If that's what you wanted to know, you should've said. He was a big man with the broads. A good-looking guy who didn't mind spending a buck." He sniffed. "Plenty guys would like to score the way he did."

"So he would have had no trouble picking up the girl?"

"Wouldn't have been the first one."

"You know anything about last night?"

He sniffed. "Don't have to know. Probably met her somewhere, conned her into thinking he was the greatest guy in the world, took her home and tried to make her come across. She bashed him

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good. Did everybody a favor. Ain't nobody sending flowers to his funeral."

"I'll leave a ten in the usual place," I promised, and hung up, telling myself to have my secretary leave ten dollars with the bartender across the street. The last personal contact I'd had with Snuffles was almost a year ago when I got him off on a petty thievery charge, and he'd been a steady source of information since.

Chetkos was leaning back in his chair in his characteristic pose, white-haired head tilted against the high leather back, eyes closed, both hands clasped loosely on the cane in front of him. His desk was littered with books. He appeared asleep but I knew that fine old brain had been working on the problem of Marcie Gray.

I cleared my throat. His eyes opened. "I hope you are back because everything has been settled."

"Hardly. I'm back because there is nothing I can do elsewhere. Everything depends on Miss Gray now. Unless she recovers and tells what happened in that apartment, we may never know." I told him all that had happened.

He leaned back and closed his eyes again.

"Any success with finding precedents?" I asked him.

"Not as yet. You can appreciate that this is something unusual."

"Does that mean you are giving up?"

"No. It means I'm trying to think. An idea is floating around in my brain but it will not stand still long enough for me to determine what it is."

"Keep trying. We need all the ideas we can get."

I went through the connecting door of the offices shaking my head. At least he was chasing an idea, which was more than I was doing. I called Landers.

"You find anything in her desk?" I asked him.

"A card from someone named Stuart Trescott. I turned it over to the detective who was here."

"Good," I approved. "What else happened?"

"Nothing. One of the girls who was friendly with Marcie has gone out to talk to the doctor."

"Exactly why I'm calling you. I want you to see him. His name is Kubinsky and he's expecting you. He needs all the information on Miss Gray that he can get. The more he knows, the more he feels he can help her."

"I'll go out there right now."

"Do that," I said, cradling the phone. I clasped my hands behind my neck and leaned back.

The only one capable of helping Marcie Gray was herself, I decided.

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McMichaels and I and Kubinsky could do all the running around and questioning of which we were capable but it all meant nothing. I might hope another person was in the apartment last night but I could never prove it, and if it hadn't been for Landers, I wouldn't even have entertained the theory. The facts said Kessler had met her and taken her home.

She must have invited him in for a nightcap, he made a pass at her and had been bashed for his pains. All of which went to prove that even nice girls could get into trouble if they weren't careful. Someone like Marcie Gray had no business getting mixed up with a man like Kessler and his booze-and-broads routine. Maybe she thought she could handle him, or maybe she thought he was an exciting character, but all her little escapade at midnight had earned her was violence and now a prolonged stay in the hospital.

There was nothing to do but sit tight, let Kubinsky gather his facts, and hope she snapped out of it. I wondered what the odds were on Marcie Gray returning to normal.

The phone rang and McMichaels' voice thundered through. "What the devil do you mean telling Kubinsky that nothing could be done without you here?"

"Just protecting my client's interests. She's in no condition to take care of herself and I insist on being there to watch out for her."

"Then you had better get out here. You're delaying me."

"From doing what?"

"Conducting an experiment. I turned up two boyfriends, one named Joe Harris and the other Stuart Trescott. Your friend Landers is here, too. Doc Kubinsky has talked to all of them and his next step is to see what happens when they talk to her. He wants to see if there is any reaction to a familiar voice, but he won't do it unless you're here, in case she recovers."

"I'm on my way."

I poked my head into Chetkos' office and told him where I was going. "Did you catch up with that idea yet?"

"Indeed I did. It has occurred to me that perhaps it isn't necessary for Miss Gray to speak at all, as long as people believe she can."

I let that race around in my brain for a moment, decided I didn't know what he was talking about, and headed for the elevator.

They were waiting for me outside Kubinsky's office. Joe Harris was a young guy in his early twenties, still wearing coveralls from the garage where he evidently worked, long blond hair curling over his ears and a mustache drooping from his lip. Stuart Tres-

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cott, red hair just as long, without a mustache and much cleaner looking because he was decked out in the latest mod suit, seemed only slightly older. I could walk out of the hospital and find their counterparts on every street in the city.

McMichaels took my arm and led me aside. "Here's the story about last night. First, she had a date with Harris but he had to work, so she went out with Trescott. She and Trescott were in a go-go joint when Trescott noticed Kessler giving her the eye. He didn't like that but he didn't want any trouble so he suggested that they leave. She didn't want to go. It grew into an argument and she told Trescott to take off. He left, but he waited long enough to see Kessler sit down next to her and begin talking."

I sighed. There was nothing new in that story. Every man had either taken part or watched it happen at one time or another. "So that's how she met Kessler. How about this Trescott? Any possibility he harbored a grudge against Kessler?"

"He may have."

"And Harris?"

He shook his head. "Worked until eleven and then went home. Says he never even knew Kessler."

"What you're saying is that neither of them has an alibi."

"Do they need one?" he countered. "It all comes back to the girl and Kessler alone in her apartment."

If there were anything more, I didn't know where to look and neither did he. Nice girl or not, capable or not, Marcie Gray was the only suspect he had. I looked at Landers, feeling sorry for him. He thought a lot of the girl but had waited too long to tell her.

"You can't charge her," I said.

"No," he sighed. "It's just as well. I'd like to help her but there's nothing I can do. Nothing you can do, either."

I half-grinned to find that McMichaels had the same helpless feeling I had.

Kubinsky motioned to us. "You and McMichaels will accompany me into the room. The nurse will bring the others in one at a time. We shall see what effect they have, if any."

I nodded agreement and we all trooped down the corridor to the prison wing.

I shivered. It was a cold room, with bare white walls, heavy metal screens on the windows and a matron outside the door. They had put a hospital gown on Marcie and her face had less color than the gown, a child's face, smooth and scrubbed and paler than the long blonde hair. She sat on a chair in

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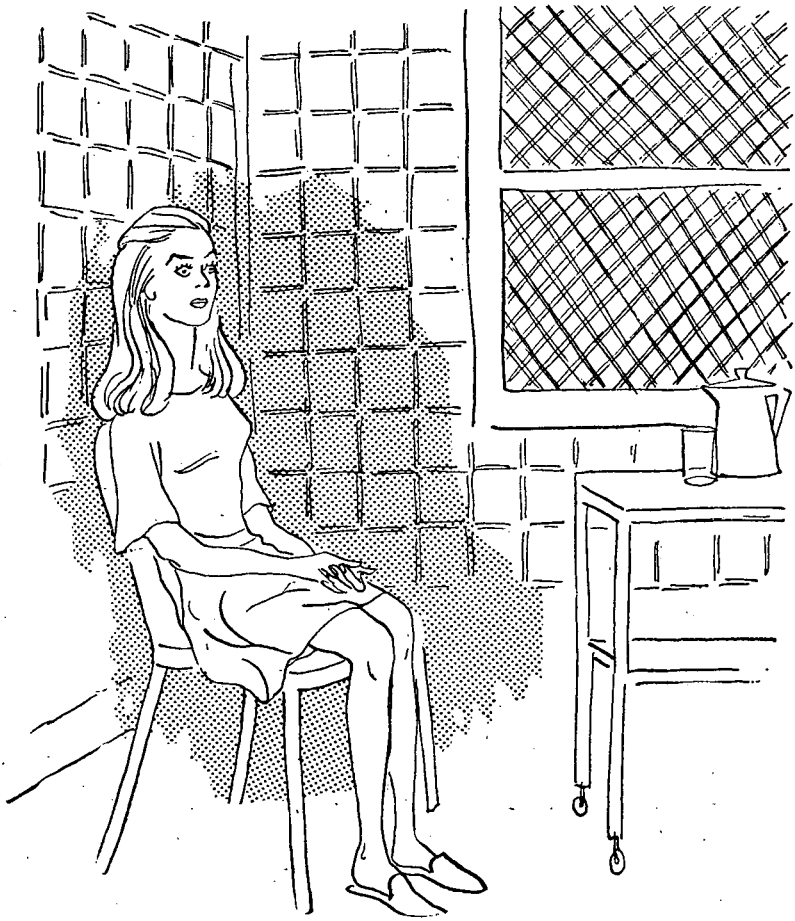

the corner, bare white knees projecting from beneath the too short gown, hands folded in her lap, staring at nothing.

You could hear traffic outside but in the room nothing moved. Her face was impassive, her eyes dull, but with it all she was still a beautiful woman and it just didn't seem possible someone like this could have been mixed up with a man like Kessler.

Kubinsky motioned McMichaels and me to stand back out of the way and the nurse brought Landers in.

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Landers took two steps inside the room and stopped as if he'd run into a wall, then in one quick movement he knelt before her, took one of her hands in his and began to talk to her, his voice soft and pleading, trying to get through, to cause some reaction.

McMichaels and I glanced at each other. Listening to him, it was obvious that if love could reach her, there would be no denying Landers, and once or twice I thought the dull eyes showed a spark of interest, but she skipped away to wherever she was hiding from what had happened in the apartment last night.

Kubinsky finally lifted Landers to his feet and led him out.

The two young men accomplished nothing more; Trescott first and then Harris, both nervous, each trying to get through to her in his own way and through it all she sat unmoving. It was clear Kubinsky had his work cut out for him.

The nurse took Harris out and came back to stand alongside me.

Through the doorway I could see the three of them standing in the corridor. Landers was out of it. His relationship with the girl hadn't extended beyond the office, much to his regret now. If anyone else was involved, it had to be one of the two young men, and as long as Marcie Gray couldn't talk, he was perfectly safe and probably sighing with relief.

As long as she couldn't talk, he was safe.

Chetkos' words came back. It was only necessary for him to *think* she could talk.

I whispered to McMichaels. "Go out into the hall and keep your eye on those two."

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing much. Just keep an eye on them and close the door behind you."

After he'd gone, I said to Kubinsky. "Do you mind if I try an experiment?"

"Not as long as it doesn't hurt my patient."

I pointed at the nurse. "I want you to scream."

"Scream?"

"As loudly as you can."

"This will do my patient no good," said Kubinsky.

"It might do her all the good in the world," I said grimly. "Scream."

"I will not," she said firmly.

I looked at her closely. She was middle-aged, a plain woman with her hair pulled back and tucked under her cap. "Look over there," I said, pointing.

She turned.

I reached down and pinched her severely in a strategic spot.

She screamed very satisfactorily.

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I grinned at the shocked Kubinsky and went out into the hall. "Good news," I announced to no one in particular. "Kubinsky says she probably is going to be all right."

"What was that scream?" asked Landers.

"Kubinsky says they often do that when they snap out of it," I lied.

McMichaels looked at me suspiciously. "When can I talk to her?"

I shrugged. "He'll let us know. Soon, probably."

Landers, Trescott and Harris grouped around, Landers grinning widely, Trescott looking relieved and Harris' face blank.

"At least now she'll be able to tell us what happened," I said. "Clear the whole thing up."

"I have to get back to work," said Harris suddenly.

"Take it easy," I said. "Don't you want to hear what she has to say?"

"Nothing to do with me," he muttered.

I glanced at McMichaels. He moved closer.

"You sure?" I asked. "It's just a hunch, but I thought I saw something in her face when you were talking to her."

His head jerked up. "You can't prove—"

"No, we can't," I said pleasantly, "but Marcie can."

He broke, McMichaels making a futile effort to collar him. As he passed, I thrust out a foot, tripping him. He fell heavily, McMichaels pounced, twisting his arms behind him and snapping cuffs into place. He pulled Harris to his feet and thrust him against a wooden bench along the wall.

"Take it easy," said Harris, squirming.

"You didn't start to run because you needed exercise," snapped McMichaels. "Suppose you tell us what it's all about."

Harris shrugged, his face pale. He was putting up a good front, but he was frightened underneath. "I guess I might as well. If I don't, Marcie will."

"Better coming from you," said McMichaels.

"Hold everything," I said. "He doesn't have to say anything and you know it."

McMichaels frowned at me. "Trust you to bring that up." He turned to Harris and pulled a card from his pocket and spelled out his rights.

Harris waved him away. "I know all about that scene. I don't mind telling you what happened."

"What did happen?" asked McMichaels.

"You'd better give this some thought first," I told Harris. "Get yourself an attorney."

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He shook his head. "I've been busting to tell somebody. I wasn't going to let Marcie take the blame."

"You killed Kessler?" asked McMichaels.

Harris nodded. "I guess you could call it self-defense. After work last night, I drove by Marcie's apartment. I often did. If there was a light on, I would stop and we would talk for a while. The light was on last night."

I thought it was rather a peculiar arrangement but I'd heard stranger ones, especially from the younger generation.

"I went up to her apartment. The cat with her, Kessler, answered the door and tried to get rid of me. I could see Marcie behind him, making some sort of signal to me. It took a while for it to penetrate but I realized she wanted him out. I pushed past him and asked Marcie if there was anything I could do. She said Kessler wouldn't leave, so I told him to go. He laughed, said no kid was going to force him out, that she had invited him and he was staying. I made a move toward him. He drew a knife."

That sounded like something a man with Kessler's background would do.

"He made one swipe at me. The only thing handy was a whiskey bottle, so I picked it up and hit him with it. He went down, his head hitting the table. When I looked at him I knew he was dead. Marcie screamed. I picked up the knife for some reason, and split."

"What did you do with this knife?" McMichaels voice was on the edge of disbelief.

"I don't really remember. I threw it into the street somewhere. I know I didn't have it when I got into my car."

McMichaels muttered something under his breath. "Why didn't you just stay in the apartment and call the police?"

"I panicked, I guess. I thought Marcie would tell what happened. I didn't know she wouldn't be able to talk."

For the first time I noticed the marks the sleepless night had left on him.

His weary eyes met mine. "Now I guess I need a lawyer. Will you help me, Mr. Stoneman?"

"Of course," I said. I motioned to McMichaels. "You heard him. You can take him down and book him, but that's all. No signed statement yet, nothing until I think it all over and consult with Chetkos. I'm sure we can arrange some sort of bail. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said McMichaels. "With the girl to corroborate, there should be no trouble."

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I shook my head. "No corroboration at the moment," I said. "She still can't talk."

"But you said—"

"I lied. After all, she was my client then. All I was interested in was clearing her."

Landers, who had been looking happy, suddenly looked dejected.

"I'll see you later," I told Harris and walked out. I should have stayed, but right then I suddenly felt as tired as Harris looked.

In his office, Chetkos was leaning back, speed-reading his way through a thick reference volume, others piled before him on his desk.

"You can put those away," I said. "We won't require any precedents."

He closed the book slowly, staring at me quizzically over his spectacles. "I take it something has happened."

"It has." I filled him in on the details.

"So Landers' faith in the girl was justified," he said.

"True love has prevailed," I said drily.

He chuckled. "You grow cynical, Mr. Stoneman. At one time you were a romantic."

"Cynicism is a product of advancing years," I said. "How did you avoid it?"

"By looking at things the way they are. Harris is just an unfortunate young man who lost his head and managed to get himself into trouble."

"Just as Marcie Gray, an unfortunate young woman, managed to get herself into trouble. She's in the hospital, a man is dead, and another in custody for his death. Why? Because in her youth and ignorance, she thought she could handle someone like Kessler. Heaven protect me from the young and foolish."

"Strange," said Chetkos. "I can recall saying the same thing many times about your escapades." His face was drawn into a half-smile.

Speechless, I stared at him for a moment, then I grinned.

Maybe you have to be seventy years old to see things in their proper perspective. I wondered if I'd ever make it.

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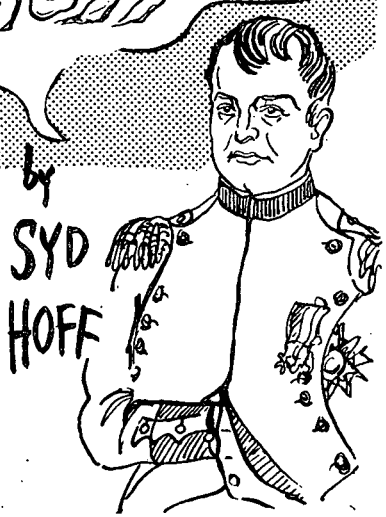
One is inclined to agree with Ibsen that old ideas and beliefs, although dormant, are still extant, like ghosts creeping between the lines.

CHANCE OF A GHOST

by SYD HOFF



BILVAN SYKE studied the dozen oblong strips again, felt the eyes of the man on the other side of his desk boring into him, but when he looked up, those eyes appeared bland enough and Kurt Newmark merely smiled. Was it by accident or design, Syke wondered, that a lock of the cartoonist's hair fell over his forehead like Napoleon's?

"Well?" Newmark inquired, blowing a ring of smoke ceilingward. "I presume you find everything satisfactory?"

Syke hesitated. *Spy Hunt* had 678 client newspapers at home and abroad. It had never seemed necessary to criticize Queen Features Syndicate's brightest young talent before. How did one start now?

"They're fine," he said, making an editorial note on the drawings with a blue crayon and placing them aside.

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Newmark crossed a leg, leaned forward a second to flick a spot of dust off one of his stylish Italian shoes. Buying the most expensive leathers had become a fetish of his ever since achieving success.

"However," said Syke carefully, "don't you think X-12 is becoming just a bit too—er, impetuous?"

Twin spots of red appeared in the other's cheeks. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"I mean that lately the chief character in your strip is no longer a mere emissary of our government. Indeed, I get the impression that he is becoming like Genghis Khan, setting down mailed-fist policies for the whole world to follow. Now you know as well as I, Newmark, that when over eighty million people read this kind of thing, it's liable to become dangerous if they believe that X-12 is speaking officially."

The spots had disappeared. "What's wrong with that? X-12 is on the side of democracy, isn't he? Whenever our allies don't move fast enough, he prods them. And if the use of force is dictated, he doesn't hesitate to advocate that either. It's a job that has to be done."

"Perhaps, but some nations are sensitive. We've already had a few cancellations abroad. Nothing serious, however . . ."

Newmark ground out his cigarette, then sat back erect. "I'm sure the Syndicate will survive," he said dryly.

The editor got up, crossed around the desk and stood by the window, gazing down at the traffic below. For a moment he remembered when comic strips were all joy and innocence—Happy Hooligan, Mutt and Jeff, Abe Kabibble, Jerry on the Job . . . Then he turned.

"Look, Newmark, I believe that you've been working too hard, that you simply need a vacation. Let's see, how long have you been doing *Spy Hunt* for us, anyway?"

"Five and a half years," Newmark said suspiciously. "I imagine you'd know that."

"Still doing all the work yourself? Drawing? Lettering?"

"Certainly."

Bilvan Syke returned to his desk. "Perhaps it's battle fatigue. In a sense, you've actually been on the front lines all that time."

"What are you getting at, Mr. Syke?"

"I was about to suggest that you get away from *Spy Hunt* for a while—get yourself a ghost."

"A ghost?"

"Yes, someone to do the physical work on the strip. All the greats in the business use them, you know that."

Newmark jumped to his feet.

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"Mr. Syke, apparently you don't understand. Nobody can do the work for me, absolutely nobody! X-12 has a job to do and he's the only one who can do it!" He snatched up his hat and marched to the door. "Good day, sir," he said in a voice that failed to conceal his hate.

By the time Kurt Newmark reached Fifth Avenue a few blocks away, his temper had subsided. Several people recognized him, probably from television appearances he had made in connection with the promotion of *Spy Hunt*. "How's X-12?" they called over to him. "What's going to happen to him in Asia? Africa? Hong Kong?"

Newmark signed a few autographs, stopped off and bought another pair of very fine shoes. Madge was sure to chide him for it. "Not again, Kurt. Really, we'll have to build a special closet for all your footwear."

Lovely Madge, sweet Madge, Madge with the long slender legs and the full bosom—Newmark thought of her all the way home, driving out to the farthest tip of the Island while the car radio crackled with reports of unrest around the world, so many places where X-12 was needed—but when he entered the house, he swept right by his wife and hurried upstairs to the attic studio with its countless plaques from Rotary Clubs and Legion Posts, and weapons sent X-12 by his many admirers in distant lands: spears, daggers, poison dart blowers . . .

For a while Newmark stood in the center of the room with one hand inside his jacket, spinning a huge globe. Then he sprang to his drawing board, pen reaching eagerly for the bottle of ink.

"Kurt! Kurt!" Madge Newmark called up to him repeatedly, finally had to deliver her husband's dinner up the stairs on a tray before returning to sit by herself before the fireplace, until the embers blinked at her and the room grew cold.

On account of Bilvan Syke's insult, Newmark stopped going into the city, except for those occasional TV appearances, which he enjoyed. He used a messenger service to deliver his finished work to the office, even hated to hear the editor's voice on the phone.

"Kurt, is that you?"

"Yes, it is I."

"Have you lost your marbles, man? In this batch that just arrived, you've got X-12 using the vilest obscenities to some of the world's most distinguished statesmen, thinly-veiled of course. If we ran these, we'd have dozens of cancellations."

"Huh?"

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"You heard me, Newmark. Don't you think newspapers have any responsibility to their readers?"

"I don't understand, Mr. Syke. There must be some mistake."

"Sure, there's a mistake and we're rectifying it right here at the office immediately. Just see that it doesn't happen again."

"Yes, sir."

"By the way, you never followed my suggestion about hiring a ghost, did you?"

"No."

Newmark hung up quickly. He had to get back to work, back to the Far East, the Middle East, Central America . . . Dammit, why didn't his wife stay downstairs? Wasn't the house big enough for the two of them?

"Kurt, may I come in a moment?"

"Yes, yes, just for a moment."

"How about coming downstairs and spending the day with me for a change?"

"Not right now, Madge. I'm busy, very busy."

"But, Kurt—"

"I'll let you know when."

The tall beauty with the full bosom realized the importance of adjusting. She couldn't even get him to come to the phone anymore when Mr. Syke called, tried to find other ways to occupy herself at home.

One day Kurt Newmark had to go downstairs and answer the front door himself. A young man stood there, holding an oblong package. "Bilvan Syke would like you to examine these," he said.

Newmark glanced disdainfully at the stranger's shoes—cheap loafers—as he took the package and ripped it open. *Spy Hunt* strips, of course, a dozen of them in the distinctive style which the great Milt himself had once remarked publicly was more like Steve Canyon than his own.

"What objection did Mr. Syke find with these?" asked Newmark anxiously, for he secretly feared his editor.

"What objection do *you* find?" smiled the young man. "*I* drew them."

When Madge came home she heard her husband singing in the attic studio, a sound strange to her ears, and when she rushed upstairs, there he was, spinning his huge globe gaily while a young man in cheap loafers sat at the drawing board, pen in hand.

"Good news," said Kurt, laughing. "I've found a ghost, a real live ghost. From now on, little Joe here will be carrying on the wars, baby, and we'll be able to spend the hours together just like you always wanted."

Yet three months later Madge

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Newmark still wasn't seeing much of her husband. He was making too many television appearances; the strip was climbing, and there was so much fan mail to answer.

"Don't worry about a thing," Bilvan Syke assured him on the phone. "Little Joe can even take care of the story line, too. A good ghost can handle *everything*."

Kurt Newmark gave himself up almost entirely to the cameras. He appeared on quiz programs, talk programs, documentaries . . . Buying shoes kept him busy, too.

"Not at all, dear," Madge assured him. "I don't mind you keeping busy. Anything you do is all right with me. If you're happy, I'm happy."

Kurt didn't even bother reading his own strip anymore. There was talk of him having his own show soon; the Kurt Newmark Show, with him sitting at a drawing board, telling 85 million viewers how to run the world.

"Like X-12 today?" little Joe called down to him late one night as he entered the house. The ghost now lived in the attic studio, had become a regular part of the household.

"Just keep bombing 'em," said Newmark. He didn't have the heart to say he hadn't looked at a paper, or proofs, for months. And why did little Joe have to go on wearing those cheap loafers, anyway? Wasn't he being paid enough?

On a Sunday night, Kurt Newmark went into town for a big variety show. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, sitting out there in our audience, the creator of *Spy Hunt*," said the M.C. "Let's hear it for America's greatest comic-strip hero and it's creator."

The studio audience went wild.

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Newmark was happy. In an hour the whole country would be seeing all this on tape.

"Kurt, I guess if a real and lasting peace ever comes to this old planet, we'll have you to thank as much as anybody," said the M.C.

Peace? Kurt Newmark rushed up the aisle and out of the theatre, past the fans cheering him, yelling his name.

On the way to the parking lot he snatched a paper off a newsstand, tore it open to the comic page. What! X-12 looked pale and ascetic, almost like a priest! There wasn't a weapon in his hands either.

"Atta boy, Mr. Newmark, give it to the warmongers," said a dowager when she saw who had backed into her car.

The Ferrari did 125 on the Long Island Expressway, but no cops tried to stop it. If they had, they might have had to use guns. It was the only way anyone ever stopped X-12 in the good old days.

Forty minutes later Newmark turned off the ignition and slid silently into his driveway. Ten seconds later he was creeping up the stairs, opening the door to his attic studio.

What he beheld wasn't entirely unexpected—little Joe sitting at the drawing board, but not working. How could anybody work with Madge on his lap?

As Kurt Newmark reached for a bolo knife on the wall, a gift from the chieftain of a small republic in the jungles of Africa, he couldn't help marveling at the thoroughness of his ghost: little Joe was wearing a pair of his best imported shoes.

Dear Fans:

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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

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It is fabled that to deceive the deceiver is a double pleasure; but in everything one must consider the end.

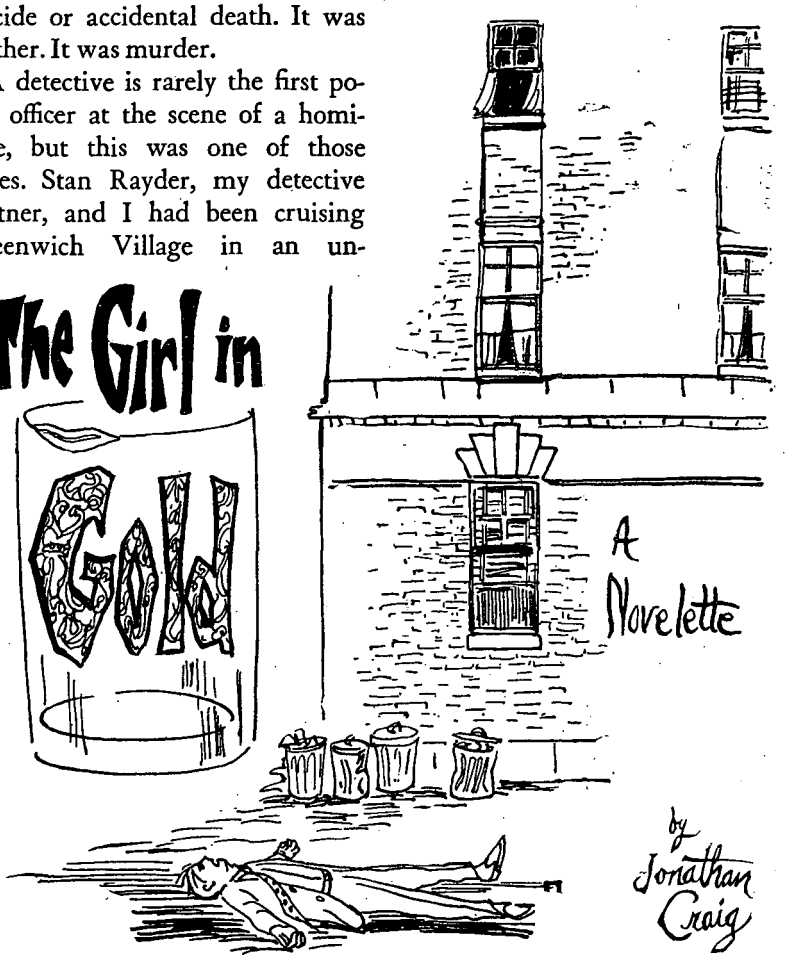
IT WAS SUPPOSED to look like either suicide or accidental death. It was neither. It was murder.

A detective is rarely the first police officer at the scene of a homicide, but this was one of those times. Stan Rayder, my detective partner, and I had been cruising Greenwich Village in an un-

The Girl in Gold

A Novelette

by Jonathan Craig



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marked patrol car, matching faces in the streets against our mental files of wanted criminals, when a small boy had run from the alley behind the Corbin Hotel, shouting that there was a dead man back there.

The boy had kept on running, and Stan, who was driving, turned into the alley.

Now, at a few minutes past six on as steamy an August evening as I could remember, we stood looking down at the body of a well-dressed, dark-haired young man who had, it would seem, fallen only minutes ago from the open window of the third-floor hotel room directly above.

He lay flat on his back, spread-eagled, and in spite of the crushing impact of his body on the concrete there was very little blood. There was a dark swelling across the bridge of his nose and a purplish discoloration of the skin on the left side of his face and on his left hand and wrist.

In New York, detectives aren't supposed to touch a body until the medical examiner has looked at it, but sometimes we cheat a little. I pushed a fingertip against the jaw, and the head moved easily to my touch.

"Any rigor mortis, Pete?" Stan asked

"No," I said, and slipped the man's wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket. It held eighty-three dollars, some business cards, and an I.D. card that said he was Harry B. Lambert, of 684 East 71st Street. I read the name and address to Stan, put the wallet back, and stood up. We'd make a closer examination, of course, after the M.E. arrived.

"That's quite a bit of postmortem lividity on his left side, there," Stan said. "It'd take about an hour for that much to show up, wouldn't it?"

"About that, yes," I said. Postmortem lividity results from the blood's settling to those parts of the body nearest the floor. In Harry Lambert's case, it meant he had lain on his left side for at least an hour before someone pushed him through that third-floor window.

"He'd been boozing a little, it smells like," Stan said, glancing at me with mild surprise.

Stan, who always appears to be mildly surprised about everything, is a tall, wiry young cop with a soft voice, a sprinkling of premature gray in his old-fashioned brush-cut, and a deceptively mild manner. He also has a black belt, the hardest fists in the department, and an almost complete lack of physical fear.

"You figure that knock he took between the eyes finished him off?" he asked.

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"Could be," I said. "Maybe somebody hoped he'd hit the pavement face down. Sort of blot out the evidence, so to speak."

"It just might have worked, too," Stan said. "Well, you're the head man on this one, Pete. What now?"

"Stay here with the body until the M.E. gets here. I'll get on the horn in the hotel and stir things up."

I walked around to the entrance of the Corbin and used one of the phone booths in the lobby to call Lieutenant Barney Fells, Stan's and my superior. Barney would take Stan and me off the duty roster and assign us fulltime to the homicide. He would also immediately notify the Communications Bureau. They, in turn, would dispatch an ambulance, and notify the other departments concerned with homicide.

The Corbin was just another small hotel, a little smaller and older and scruffier than most, perhaps, with a minimum of lobby and a bird-cage elevator no larger than a phone booth.

There was no one behind the desk. I tapped the bell a couple of times and waited.

The middle-aged man who finally came out from the room behind the desk was short and slightly built, with a large, almost perfectly round head, thinning strawlike hair, moist gray eyes, and very little chin.

"Yes, sir," he said in a voice much deeper than I would have expected. "May I help you?"

I showed him my badge. "Detective Selby," I said. "You have a Mr. Harry Lambert registered here?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir. He checked in this morning."

"Anyone with him?"

"No."

I got out my notebook. "I'll need your name."

"Dobson. Wayne Dobson."

"Did Mr. Lambert have any visitors?"

"Not that I know of. Why? What's happened?"

"He's dead. Out in the alley behind the hotel. He went out the window."

Dobson sucked in his breath. "A suicide?"

"You know him personally?"

"No. But I . . ." He shook his head slowly. "This is the first time anything like this has ever happened here."

"You only come to the desk when someone rings the bell?"

"Usually, yes."

"What room was Lambert in?"

"Just a moment." He turned to check his file of registration cards. "Three-oh-four."

"He put his home address on

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there, on the registration card?"

"Yes, sir. It's the law. He put down Six eighty-four East Seventy-first."

"What time did he check in?"

"Eleven forty-five."

I put my notebook away. "I'll need a key to his room, Mr. Dobson. And please stay close to the desk. There'll be other police along any minute."

He nodded. "Of course," he said as he handed me a master key on a big loop of heavy wire. "I'll do all I can to help."

I crossed to the elevator, but I had second thoughts. I have a thing about elevators of that size and vintage. I took another look at it, and then walked to the other side of the lobby and started up the stairs.

I might have been in a smaller hotel room at one time or another, but I couldn't remember it; I knew I'd never been in a hotter one. The metal bed and metal dresser seemed to have been painted over with green house paint, and the ratty lounge chair looked to be on the verge of giving way to its own weight.

There were no indications of a struggle, but Harry Lambert appeared to have had at least one visitor, and that one a woman. There was a nearly empty fifth of whiskey at one end of the dresser and a couple of hotel glasses at the other, and one of the glasses had a smear of lipstick on the rim.

There was nothing under the bed but dust, and nothing in the closet but more dust and two rusty coat hangers. There was nothing in the bathroom, either.

I went over to search the dresser. There was a handsome black attaché case in the top drawer, nothing at all in the others. I put the case on the bed, handling it carefully to avoid obliterating fingerprints, and opened it.

The case held, among other things, another black case, about ten inches long, six inches wide, and half an inch thick, embossed with Harry Lambert's name in gold, and to which was attached about two feet of gold chain with a clip on the end of it. I'd seen a number of such cases; they are used by diamond salesmen to carry gems and are known as jewelers' wallets. It was empty.

The attaché case also held, in various compartments, a jeweler's loupe, a miniature pair of scales and a set of weights in a clear plastic box, and a large number of the squares of white tissue paper in which diamond salesmen wrap their stones.

I put the case back on the dresser, took off my coat, and began stripping down the bed. I found

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the tube of lipstick in the space between the pillows.

It was no ordinary lipstick. Even the cheapest ones can look expensive, of course, but this one was the genuine article. It was of heavy gold, with a beautifully engraved floral design along its length and the initials "L.C." in a monogram on the cap.

It was the kind of thing women never buy for themselves. It was also the kind of costly, handcrafted item that just might have a secret jeweler's mark. Headquarters maintains a file of hundreds of such marks, just as it does of laundry marks.

I found the mark with the help of my handkerchief and the loupe from Lambert's attaché case. It was inside the cap, at the top: an anchor surrounded by three concentric circles.

I put the lipstick on the dresser beside the attaché case and finished searching the bed. I was just putting my jacket back on when there was a knock on the door and two techs and a photographer from headquarters came in.

"Hi, Pete," the chief tech said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "You think it might warm up a little?"

"We can hope," I said. "You finished in the alley?"

"Nothing to do down there. Just the pictures, was all. They're done."

"I'd better get a couple of bird's-eye shots from the window," the photographer said, moving off.

"The M.E. show up yet?" I asked.

"He got there just as we left. Doc Chaney."

"Well, it's all yours, Ed," I said, turning to leave. "I want to have a few more words with the desk clerk."

Before I went downstairs, I knocked at the doors at either side of Lambert's and at the one directly across the hall. There was no answer at any of them.

When I reached the lobby, I found that Wayne Dobson had abandoned his desk again. The door behind it was slightly ajar. I went back and opened it the rest of the way.

Dobson was lying on the bed in a room that, except for a portable TV set and the iron bars usually found on first-floor windows in New York, was the mirror image of the one I'd just left upstairs. He looked even smaller lying down than he had behind the desk, and his eyes seemed drawn with pain.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He smiled up at me thinly. "Ulcers. That suicide got me pretty upset."

"Can I do anything for you?"

He shook his head and pushed

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himself up on the side of the bed. "It'll pass. At least it always has."

"Feel up to talking a little?"

He shrugged. "If I have to, I have to. What do you want to know?"

"Well, first, where are the bellhops? I haven't seen any."

"Joe Moody's on. The trick is to find him."

"Moody go up with Lambert when he checked in?"

"No. Joe wasn't around at the time."

"Lambert had some company," I said. "A woman. You see any women pass through the lobby?"

"I saw one, a beauty. She took the elevator."

"You have any idea who she was?"

"No, but she was something to see; silver blonde, a terrific build, and a gold dress like a second skin. Real bright, shiny gold dress. Must have cost a mint."

"When was this?"

"Oh . . . about four, I'd say. Maybe a little later."

"She the only woman you saw?"

"Yes. Mr. Selby, would you do me a favor, please? There's a shoe box out beneath the desk with a lot of odds and ends in it, stuff people have left in their rooms. I just remembered I put a bottle of antacid tablets in it the other day. Maybe they'd help."

I went out to the desk, dug around in the shoe box until I found the tablets, and took them back to Dobson.

"Thanks," he said. "Don't ever get an ulcer."

"Just one more thing, and I'll let you rest. Do you handle the switchboard?"

"Yes. The desk clerk here does everything but make a living."

"Did Lambert make or receive any calls?"

"Damn!"

"What's wrong?"

"I completely forgot. Yes, he did get a call. And the guy that called him was plenty sore about something. He started right off cussing him. Mr. Lambert kept saying, 'Now, just a minute, Rocky,' and 'Listen, Rocky,' and 'Let me explain,' and things like that."

"All right. But aside from the cussing, what did this man *say?*"

"Nothing. He just kept blessing him out. Then all at once Mr. Lambert hung up."

"The man call back?"

"No."

"When did he call?"

"I can tell you exactly. It was ten minutes of four. As it happened, I'd just set my watch." He suddenly grimaced with pain and lay back on the bed. "Like I told you," he said, "never get yourself an ulcer."

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I made a few notes in my book, thanked Dobson for his help, and walked around the hotel to see how Stan Rayder and the M.E. were coming along with their work in the alley.

There were two more police cars and an ambulance there now, and perhaps a hundred or so onlookers.

"Doc Chaney here says he can get a pretty close fix on the time of death, Pete," Stan said, after I'd shouldered my way through the crowd. "He puts it somewhere between four and five p.m."

"That's right," the M.E. said, looking up from where he knelt by the body. "This is the one time in a hundred when I can set fairly tight limits."

"How about that bruise between his eyes, Doc?" Stan asked. "You figure it could have killed him?"

"*Could* have, yes. It's likely a depressed fracture. But we'll have to wait till I autopsy him, Stan." He stood up and glanced in the direction of the ambulance. "I'm finished, Pete. If you'll release the body, I can take it back with me."

"You get everything out of his pockets, Stan?" I asked.

"Yes," Stan said, tapping the bulge in the side pocket of his jacket. "Nothing helpful, though. There was nothing in his billfold but the cards and money."

I had the M.E. sign a receipt for the body. Then Stan and I pushed through the crowd to the car we'd come in and got inside.

"So Lambert was a diamond salesman, eh?" Stan said, after I'd filled him in on my search of the hotel room and my talks with the desk clerk. "What a way to run a railroad. A hundred people could have gone in and out, but the only one we know about for sure is that girl in the gold dress."

"We may pick up some others from the bellhop." I started the engine and began to back the car out of the alley. "I'm going uptown to check at the address on Lambert's I.D. card, Stan. You—"

"Yes, I know," he said wryly. "I get to stay here and boss the operation in that bake-oven upstairs."

"Somebody always has to do the dirty dishes, Stan."

"Sure, but why does it always have to be me?"

"First of all, get hold of that bellhop. Then see if any of the other guests on Lambert's floor saw or heard anything. Also, there's a newsstand across the street. Maybe the man that runs it noticed something."

I turned the corner and pulled up in front of the hotel entrance. "One more thing," I said. "Send somebody over to headquarters with that lipstick. I want a check made on the jeweler's mark."

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Stan sighed. "You sure you can't think of any other little things I can do for you?"

"Not offhand," I said. "Still, if I really worked at it . . ."

He grinned. "Never mind," he said, opening the door. "I'll see you at the squad room."

Six eighty-four East Seventy-first turned out to be a posh-looking converted brownstone. I found a mailbox with a name card that read LAMBERT/MANNING—2A, and pushed the button beneath it. A moment later the buzzer released the inner door of the foyer and I climbed the stairs to the second floor.

A heavyset man with his arms folded across his chest was standing in the open doorway of 2A, frowning at me as I approached. He was about thirty, I judged, with a lot of thick, sand-colored hair, a deep widow's peak, and unusually heavy brows over very small hazel eyes with yellow flecks in them.

"You the one that buzzed 2A?" he asked, giving it a little edge.

I showed him the tin. "Detective Selby," I said. "Are you a friend of Mr. Lambert's?"

"He lives here. We both do. What's up?"

"We could talk a little better inside."

He hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and motioned me into the apartment.

The livingroom wasn't very large, but the furnishings had cost someone a lot of money. I sat down in a cream-leather easy chair and nodded to the sofa across from it.

"Let's see, now," I said as I got out my book. "Your full name is what?"

He glowered at me, but he came over and sat down. "David D. Manning," he said. "And make yourself right at home, Selby."

"Thanks. You and Mr. Lambert pretty close friends?"

"We're roommates," he said. "We get along. Why?"

"I've a little bad news for you, I'm afraid. He's been killed."

He started to say something, then changed his mind and sat looking at me as if he were trying to decide whether I was telling the truth.

I waited.

"How?" Manning asked.

"We're not just sure. Somebody tried to cover it up by pushing him out a window."

"Somebody? Does that mean you don't know who did it?"

"Not yet."

He got up suddenly and walked over to a bar in the corner. "I could use a drink," he said, pouring a couple of inches into a highball

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glass. "How about some for you?"

"No, thanks."

He took a pull at his drink, walked slowly back to the sofa, and sat down again. "It's hard to believe," he said.

"He married? Separated?"

"No."

"Divorced?"

"No."

"We'll want to notify his next of kin. You know who that might be?"

"No, I don't. He never mentioned any relatives. His parents are dead, I know."

"He have a good income?"

"We averaged about the same, I guess. Twenty thousand one year, twenty-five the next."

"You're a diamond salesman, too, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, the big question is, of course, do you know anyone who'd want him dead?"

Manning smiled sourly. "I can think of two or three who'd like that just fine."

"Who?"

"Well, there's this girl he used to be engaged to, Barbara Nolan. Harry threw her over for another girl. Barbara swore she'd kill him."

"He take her seriously?"

"Not at first. Then he started to. It was beginning to sweat him plenty. I guess she convinced him."

"You know where she lives?"

"It's in the Village. Five forty-two Waverly Place."

"You said there were others."

He took a sip of his drink. "Well, there's a guy named Mel Pearce, another diamond salesman. He thought Harry stole a big sale from him. He had almost an obsession about it. Once I had to get between them to keep them from climbing all over each other."

"You know where I can find him?"

"He lives on Central Park West, I think. I don't know just where."

I turned over to a new page in my notebook. "That's two," I said. "Anyone else?"

"Not that I know of."

"Harry got a tough phone call from somebody named Rocky. That name mean anything to you?"

Manning frowned thoughtfully, then shook his head. "No."

"Was Harry in trouble of any kind? Any dealings with shylocks? Any civil suits? Gambling debts? Anything at all like that?"

"No. At least not so far as I know."

"You said he threw Barbara Nolan over for another girl. What's her name?"

"Elaine Greer." He nodded toward a large color portrait on the

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coffee table. "That's her picture."

I went over to examine it. The girl was very young, very blonde and very beautiful, but it was a cold beauty, and the smile that curved her lips had somehow failed to reach her slightly-tilted blue eyes.

"I'll want to talk to her," I said. "You know her address?"

"No. She's in the Manhattan book, though, I know."

"Harry pretty much of a ladies' man, was he?"

"No. He practically had to beat them off with a club, but he always stuck pretty much to one girl at a time." He paused. "She must be a very potent proposition, that girl. Elaine, I mean. Harry was practically out of his skull over her. As I said, he and Barbara were going to get married. But when he met Elaine, he forgot all about Barbara. She had Harry so crazy for her he didn't know which way was up."

"You know Elaine yourself, do you?"

"No, I never met her, and I reached the point where I wished Harry hadn't, either. She was all he talked about. He went around mooning over her like a fifteen-year-old kid with his first big crush. You had to see it to believe it."

I shifted my weight around in the chair a little and ran out a fresh point on my pencil. "Who'd Harry work for?"

"Nobody. He took stones out on memo."

"On memo?"

"On consignment. He might be peddling stones for half a dozen dealers at the same time. A memo is the dealer's record of the stones he gives you. You just sign the memo, and that's it."

"His reputation must have been pretty good, then."

"Better than good. Perfect."

"When was the last time you saw him, Mr. Manning?"

He glanced at me sharply, then raised his glass and finished his drink, watching me over the rim.

"Don't tell me I'm a suspect," he said.

"Just a routine question, Mr. Manning," I said. "But when?"

He put the glass down on the end table beside the sofa. "This morning," he said. "And it was a very strange thing. I didn't know what to make of it."

"What happened?"

"Well, the phone in Harry's room rang early, about six or so. It woke me up. I went out to the kitchen to make coffee, and a few minutes later Harry came in with his attaché case under his arm, all dressed to go out. He looked like something had just scared the hell out of him."

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"What did he say to you then?"

"Nothing. I asked him what was wrong, but he walked right past me and grabbed a fifth of whiskey out of the cabinet and took a heavy belt straight out of the bottle. I was amazed. It was the first time I'd seen him take a drink in more than a year. He used to have a drinking problem, you see. No tolerance for the stuff at all. And here he was, suddenly gulping it straight out of the bottle."

"He didn't say anything at all?"

"Not a word. I think he was only half aware I was there. I asked him who had called so early, but I don't think he even heard me. He wasn't in the kitchen more than half a minute."

"And he left the apartment right away?"

"Yes."

"Did you overhear any of what he said on the phone?"

"No," Manning said, and got up to pour himself another drink.

I watched him carefully. There was something about Dave Manning that bothered me. He was just too cool for the circumstances; but when he came back and took his seat again, I noticed something that told me the coolness was all on the surface. He sat leaning back comfortably against the cushion, apparently completely relaxed, perhaps even a little bored, but he was gripping his highball glass so tightly that the knuckles of his hand were bone-white.

I thumbed back through my notes, then got to my feet. "Your phone book handy?" I asked.

"Over there, by the bar."

"This diamond salesman you said was feuding with Harry," I said. "Mel Pearce. His first name Melvin?"

"No. Melford."

I located a Melford Pearce at 216 Central Park West. Elaine Greer, the girl for whom Harry had thrown over Barbara Nolan, was listed at 734 East 58th.

"I think that'll do it for this time, Mr. Manning," I said as I crossed to the door. "Thanks very much."

"No trouble at all," Manning said easily. "I wish you luck."

I went down to the street and walked along to where I'd left the car. It was completely dark now, but the soggy air was just as stifling as it had been at noon, and it would be that way all night. There was a lot of heat lightning flickering around the spire of the Empire State Building to the south, and the blare of the boat horns from the East River had that muffled sound they have when an early-evening fog has set in.

I worked the car out into the traffic and headed downtown for a

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talk with Barbara Nolan, the girl whose threat against Harry Lambert's life had caused him considerable concern.

The one-room apartment above the curio shop on Waverly Place was small, even by Greenwich Village standards, and the girl who had let me inside was petite and pretty and very angry. She had shoulder-length hair so black that it had blue highlights in it, a small oval face with skin like fresh cream, and deep-brown eyes under sooty lashes so long that at first I'd thought they were false.

"So why come to me about it?" she said, glaring at me from her perch on a hassock. "What am I supposed to do? Throw myself on his funeral pyre or something?"

"Not necessarily," I said. "I'll settle for the answers to a few questions."

She brushed the hair back from her forehead with the back of her hand and crossed her legs the other way.

"You're pretty sure I killed him, aren't you?" she said.

"I didn't say that, Miss Nolan."

"You don't have to. It's written all over your big, ugly cop's face."

"We also have a big, ugly station house. Would you rather talk there?"

"Well, just for the record, I didn't do it. And also, just for the

record, I definitely wish I had."

"And yet, at one time, you were going to marry him."

"Dave Manning certainly gave you a full briefing, didn't he?"

"What do you do for a living, Miss Nolan?"

"I'm a designer. Jewelry, mostly. Also money clips, belt buckles, compacts, lipsticks, perfume bottles, eyeglass frames—et cetera."

"You at work this afternoon? Say, between four and five?"

"Oh, so that's it. That's when he

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was murdered, wasn't it?" she said.

"Just answer the question, please."

"I work at home. I haven't been out of the place all day."

"You threatened Mr. Lambert's life more than once, I believe."

"I meant it, too." She paused to light a cigarette. "Dave Manning told you about that too, I suppose?"

"Most girls don't threaten to kill a man just because he changes his mind about getting married."

"Just *because!* You make it sound like nothing at all, like he merely changed his mind about going to a movie or something." She took a short, angry drag on the cigarette and exhaled the smoke through her nostrils. "And besides, I'm not 'most girls.' I'm me. And I just don't take a thing like that."

"And is that all he did to you?"

"Is that all!" Her dark eyes seemed to have tiny fires behind them. "Why, yes, you simple man, that's all he did to me. What more would he have to do? Stake me out on an anthill?"

"You know a girl named Elaine Greer?"

"No. Should I?"

"How about someone named Rocky?"

"No. No Rockys, either."

"You ever been in the Corbin Hotel?"

"I've never even *heard* of the Corbin Hotel."

"You know anyone who'd have liked to see Lambert dead?"

"Yes. Me. I—"

"Let's cooperate a little here, Miss Nolan. All right?"

She stabbed the cigarette out in a tray on the floor beside the hassock and crossed her legs again. "Just for starters," she said, "how about that fink, Dave Manning? He hated Harry, you know. I mean, *really* hated him."

"Why?"

"Because of me. Harry took me away from him. Did he tell you that? No, of course he didn't." She paused meaningfully. "Dave took it very hard. *Very* hard. It tore him up in little pieces." She raised one eyebrow and smiled at me. "Get the picture?"

"They continued to live together, though."

"What does *that* prove, for heaven's sake?"

I asked Miss Nolan a few more questions, none of which bought me anything, and got up to leave.

"Thanks for your help," I said. "It's possible we'll want to talk to you again, Miss Nolan."

"Oh, no doubt about it," she said. "And thank *you*—for bringing me such good news."

When I reached the squad room at the station house the hands on

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the big electric clock over the wall speaker stood at 9:42. Stan Rayder was at his desk, hammering at his ancient typewriter, a look of faint surprise on his lean face, as if the complaint report in his typewriter were the first one he'd ever seen.

I draped my jacket over the back of my chair and sat down. "How'd it go over at the hotel?" I asked.

"All buttoned up," Stan said. "Police seal on the door and all."

"Come up with anything?"

"Not in the room, no. Somebody'd wiped all the prints off the bottle and the glasses, though. I sent them over to the lab anyhow, along with everything else."

"Good. How about the lipstick? You ask for a check on the jeweler's mark?"

He nodded. "We just had a call on it. They had the mark on file, all right. The engraver lives in Brooklyn. I had them send a man over to see if he can round him up."

"You talk to the bellhop?"

"Yes, for all the good it did. Same goes for the maids. And none of the people in the rooms around Lambert's were in. The newsstand operator across the street saw the girl in the gold dress, though, the one the desk clerk told you about. She went in somewhere around four, he thinks. He didn't notice her come out again."

"Did you get anything else?"

"Yes. We've had a couple of panic calls from diamond dealers. It seems Harry Lambert took out about fifty thousand dollars' worth of stones on consignment this morning." He paused. "Maybe he was murdered for them, maybe not. Maybe he was going to run with them. Maybe a lot of things."

I told Stan what I'd learned from Dave Manning and Barbara Nolan, and then phoned the I.D. Bureau to ask for checks on Dave Manning, Barbara Nolan, Elaine Greer, Mel Pearce, and Harry Lambert himself.

A few minutes later they called back to say they had nothing on any of them except Elaine Greer. A cross-reference check had shown that she was the wife of an ex-convict named Ralph Greer, who had been released four days ago from the State Hospital for the Criminal Insane at Matteawan.

Ralph Greer's rap sheet showed bits for grand larcency, aggravated assault, and extortion. His only known criminal associate was another ex-con, Floyd Stoner, now thought to be living at 631 West 74th Street. The present whereabouts of Greer himself were unknown.

"So Lambert's new girlfriend had a husband," Stan said when I relayed the information to him.

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"And the husband hits the street only four days ago. That sounds pretty good, Pete."

I dialed Communications, asked that a pickup order be put out for Ralph Greer, then stood up and reached for my jacket.

"I think Mrs. Greer deserves the pleasure of our company, Stan," I said. "Let's not deny her any longer."

As it happened, Mrs. Greer was to be denied that pleasure, after all. She wasn't home.

We had the same luck when we drove uptown to talk to Floyd Stoner, the man who had once been Ralph Greer's criminal associate. Stoner wasn't home, either.

"We're batting a thousand," Stan said as we walked back down the stairs. "At this rate, we'll wrap things up just in time to put in for our pensions."

I used the wall phone in the first-floor hall to ask for pickups on both Elaine Greer and Floyd Stoner, and arranged for plain-clothes stakeouts to be stationed at their apartment houses. Then we went out to the car.

"I'll drive," Stan said as he got behind the wheel. "Your driving's too hairy for my nerves. Where to?"

"Two sixteen Central Park West."

"Who's there?"

"Mel Pearce, the diamond salesman who thought Lambert cheated him out of a sale."

Stan sighed. "Poor Lambert," he said. "There must be at least one person in this town who wasn't gunning for him. I wonder who it could be?"

Mel Pearce was about fifty, I judged, a graying, slightly stooped man with protuberant eyes behind thick, rimless glasses, abnormally long arms, and very fast answers to every question except the one about his whereabouts between four and five p.m.

He had, he said, spent the time "just walking around the midtown area, mulling over some deals I hoped to make."

As for his troubles with Lambert over the disputed diamond sale, that had all been a misunderstanding. He'd found that he had been in error, had apologized to Lambert, and that had been the end of it.

I called the squad room to see whether there had been any developments. There had.

The stakeout I'd had stationed at Floyd Stoner's apartment house had called to say that a man answering the description of Ralph Greer's former criminal associate had been seen entering the building.

It was a five-story house with pa-

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per tape across the cracks in the first-floor windows, trash in the foyer, and garbage on the stairs. There was no problem getting in; someone had propped the door open with the tattered remains of a phone book in a futile effort to encourage ventilation.

I knocked at the door of 301. There was a a faint sound of movement from somewhere inside, but no one came to the door. I knocked again. This time, there was no sound at all.

"Police," I said.

"You're too polite," Stan said. "You got to give it more clout." He stepped close to the door. "It's the law!" he called loudly. "Open up here!"

About fifteen seconds passed.

I drew Stan a little way back from the door. "Stay here," I said. "I'll cover the fire escape. If you hear anything interesting, break in."

I went up to the top floor, climbed the metal ladder to the roof, and eased myself down the fire escape until I was outside the rear window of the apartment.

There was a half-inch gap between the bottom of the window shade and the sill. I peered through it into the room beyond. The blonde girl with the slightly tilted eyes who lay trussed and gagged on the bed was the same girl I'd seen in the photograph in Dave Manning's apartment: Elaine Greer. She was struggling against the towels with which she'd been bound, her bright gold dress bunched up around her hips.

I tried the window. It was locked. I stood back and kicked the glass out of the frame. Then I unholstered my gun, jumped inside, and ran toward the bedroom door.

I jerked the door open just as Stan, alerted by the sound of breaking glass, burst through the front door with a crash of splintering wood, gun in hand.

We stood looking at each other across an empty room.

"What the hell?" Stan said. "I heard something in here. So did you."

"There's a girl tied up in the bedroom," I said. "Elaine Greer. What we heard was her trying to get loose."

"Elaine Greer?"

I nodded. "In a shiny gold dress. Just like the girl at the Corbin Hotel was wearing."

The noise had brought some of the tenants to investigate, and now they stood gaping at us from the hallway.

"Police business," I said. "Clear the hall, please."

Mrs. Greer was almost hysterical. It was several minutes before she calmed down enough to talk to us.

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Even then, it took considerable backtracking before we got a coherent story from her.

She had, she said, been an unwilling participant in a phony kidnapping. Her husband, of whom she was terrified, had learned of her affair with Harry Lambert while he was still in the state mental hospital. When he had been released, four days ago, he had looked up his old friend, Floyd Stoner, and together they had worked out a way to make the most of Lambert's feelings for Mrs. Greer.

The two men had taken her to Stoner's apartment, where, under threat of death if she refused, she had been forced to make the early-morning phone call that Lambert's roommate had told us about. She had told Lambert she had been kidnapped, and that she would be killed unless he came up with a ransom of $50,000 worth of small, easily sold diamonds. Lambert, whose insurance would cover that amount, was to claim that he had been robbed by two armed men who had forced themselves into his car.

Lambert was to put the gems in a chamois bag, take a room at the Corbin Hotel under his own name, and wait for a phone call giving him further instructions. When Ralph Greer had called him there, however, Lambert had not answered the phone. Greer got mad.

"I was half out of my mind," Elaine Greer said. "I knew I had to do something about it. Then I saw a chance to slip out of the apartment, and I did."

"And?" Stan said.

"I'd heard my husband tell Stoner what Harry's room number was at the Corbin. I got a cab and went there. I knocked and knocked, but Harry didn't answer his door. Then I heard someone behind me—and there was my husband, with a gun in his hand. For a minute I thought he was going to kill me right there. I could see it in his eyes. But then he put the gun away and said something about getting the diamonds one way or another. He opened Harry's door with a piece of celluloid. He slipped it between the door and the jamb and—"

"We know the technique," Stan said. "Go on."

"Well, the door opened right up. We went in, and—and Harry was lying there on the bed. He was dead. I must have gasped or something, because Ralph slapped me hard and told me to shut up. He looked for the diamonds, but they weren't there. Then he slapped me again and put his jacket over his arm so noboby could see he was holding a gun on me, and brought me back here in a cab."

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"Why'd they tie you up?" Stan asked.

"They were going to kill me. I heard Ralph say so. They didn't want me left around to tell what they'd been up to."

"Where are they now?" I asked.

"I don't know. They left about twenty minutes ago." Her eyes suddenly flooded with tears. "They made me do what I did," she said. "They'd have killed me if I hadn't. They were going to kill me anyway."

Stan and I stood looking at her.

"It's true!" she said. "Everything I've told you is the truth!"

We arranged for additional stakeouts in and around the apartment building, beefed up the pickup order on Greer and Stoner to a thirteen-state alarm, and then took Mrs. Greer down to the station house.

On our way through the squad room to one of the interrogation rooms at the rear, I paused at my desk to see whether there was anything on my call spike or in my IN basket that pertained to the homicide.

There was a lab report saying that the lipstick in the tube I'd found in Lambert's bed and the lipstick on the glass were the same. The smear on the glass, however, had not been left there by a woman's lips; it appeared, rather, to have been put there with the ball of someone's thumb or fingertip. A test had revealed that at the time of his death Lambert's blood had a point five concentration of alcohol.

There was a brief, preliminary report from the medical examiner saying, in essence, that Lambert had died as the result of a blow inflicted by some blunt object to the base of his nose.

There was also a message on my call spike to phone Ed Gault, the detective who had checked out the jeweler's mark in the lipstick I had found in Lambert's room.

"Good news on that lipstick, Pete," Ed said when I got through to him. "I not only found the guy that made it, I even talked to the girl he made it for. It was a gift from a friend of hers, and her name was on the gift certificate."

It had been the wrong thing for Ed to do, since he might have flushed a prime suspect, but I let it go.

"What'd you find out?" I asked.

"Well, the girl's name is Linda Cole. She lives at the Pendleton, and a prettier little liar you won't find, believe me. She finally admitted being at the Corbin Hotel, and she even admitted that she might have lost her lipstick there. But she says she was there almost a month ago, and she hasn't been near the

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place since." He laughed. "Some story."

"Thanks, Ed," I said. "We'll take it from there."

I hung up and sat drumming my fingertips on the desk for a moment. There had been some lying done, all right, but I had a feeling it hadn't been done by Linda Cole.

I motioned Mrs. Greer to a seat on the chair beside my desk, and then drew Stan away a few paces to tell him about the reports and my talk with Ed Gault.

Stan shook his head, and for once some of the surprise on his face was real. "It looks like somebody ought to get his mouth fixed, doesn't it?" he said. "It just doesn't work right."

"Make sure Mrs. Greer knows her rights and gets a lawyer."

"You're going over there?"

"Yes."

"I'll go with you."

"I don't expect that much trouble, Stan," I said. "Besides, one of us ought to be here in case something breaks on Greer and Stoner."

I went downstairs, checked out a car, and drove the few blocks to the Corbin Hotel.

Once again there was no one behind the desk, but there was a light beneath the door of Wayne Dobson's room beyond it, and I could hear someone moving around in there. I went back to the door, turned the knob very slowly, and inched it open.

The desk clerk was moving between his bed and the dresser, packing a suitcase. He was completely dressed for the street, even to a hat, and he was moving quickly, as if he had a lot to do and very little time in which to do it.

"Leaving us, Mr. Dobson?" I said as I stepped inside.

He spun to face me. His jaw sagged for an instant, but he recovered fast. "What's this?" he demanded. "Why didn't you knock?"

"We're old friends by now," I said. "I thought I'd be welcome."

There was an airline envelope on the dresser. I took the ticket out and looked at the name on it. It was made out to "J. Jackson" for a flight to Los Angeles.

"And a one-way ticket, too," I said.

"That belongs to a guest. What's the meaning of this, Selby?"

"And is that suitcase you're packing also a guest's?"

"It's no concern of yours, either way. Is there any law that says I can't go anywhere I want to, *when* I want to?"

"There just might be," I said. "Impeding a homicide investigation is a serious charge."

"Impede? What's the matter with you? Impede in what way?"

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"You told me Harry Lambert got a phone call from someone named Rocky at exactly 3:50 p.m. You were certain about it."

"So?"

"There wasn't any Rocky, Mr. Dobson. And Lambert didn't do any talking on the phone. He was an ex-alcoholic with no tolerance for liquor at all, but he drank a lot of it in that room, and he died with a point five concentration of

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alcohol in his blood. At 3:50 he wasn't only drunk, he was too drunk even to mumble." I paused. "Why'd you lie?"

"I didn't. I—"

"And there's that fancy tube of lipstick you planted in Lambert's bed. It was lost here a month ago, and you put it in the shoe box under the desk, the one from which you had me get the antacid tablets. What you took for just another jazzy drugstore lipstick was an expensive, hand-engraved—"

"Now I get it," Dobson broke in. "You think you're going to frame me for—"

"And another thing," I said. "You smeared some of the lipstick on a glass to make us think Lambert had company in his room. That puzzles me a little, Mr. Dobson. Why'd you do it?"

"I—" Dobson began, then suddenly compressed his lips and stood there, glaring at me.

I moved to the bed and lifted the top layer of clothing out of the suitcase. It was there, all right—a chamois-leather bag, no bigger than the kind that kids keep their marbles in.

I glimpsed the bag in the same instant I felt the stab of Dobson's gun in my back. We stood that way, neither of us moving or speaking, for what must have been a full ten seconds.

Then, "Get into the bathroom," Dobson said. "Take it real slow."

"Why?" I said. "A gunshot will carry just as well from there as it will here."

"Real slow, now," he said. "Get going, Selby."

I shrugged, took one slow step in the direction of the bathroom—and then dropped, clawing for my gun, starting to roll the instant I hit the floor.

Dobson's first shot missed, but his second burned a path across my left bicep. Then my own gun bucked in my hand and I saw Dobson's body jerk back from the impact of a slug in his stomach.

It was like watching a slow-motion film. Dobson's right arm lowered almost inch by inch until the gun fell from his hand, and he folded first one arm and then the other across his middle, stood there swaying back and forth for several seconds. Then, very slowly, he sank to his knees.

I kicked Dobson's gun under the bed, put my own back in its holster, and took two of the clean undershirts from the suitcase.

Dobson had lost interest in everything except the blood seeping from the bullet hole in his abdomen. He watched with dull eyes as I wadded one undershirt beneath his belt to serve as a compress and wrapped the other one around my

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arm where his slug had furrowed the skin. Then I went out to the switchboard to call an ambulance. The shots had brought several guests to the lobby, but I ignored them.

The ambulance was there in eight minutes. I helped the intern put Dobson's stretcher in the back and took a seat on the bench across from it. The intern climbed in beside me, and a moment later the ambulance lurched away from the curb.

"I'm going to die," Dobson said, almost completely without emotion. "You've killed me, Selby. I'm dying."

There wasn't a chance in a thousand of his dying, of course, and the intern opened his mouth to say so, but I kicked his ankle and he shut his mouth again. When a person is sure he is dying, even though he is not, anything he says has the full legal weight of a "deathbed confession," technically known as a dying declaration. It was my job to get such a declaration if I could.

"I guess there are some things you'd like to say, Mr. Dobson," I said. "Maybe now would be the time."

He lay looking at me unblinkingly while the ambulance traveled the better part of a block. Then his eyes drifted away from mine and he moved his head slowly and sadly from side to side.

"I should never have learned karate," he said quietly, almost as if to himself. "If I hadn't, Lambert would still be alive and I . . . I wouldn't be here dying." His voice was resigned and weak, but steady, with an undertone of irony in it.

"Is that how he died?" I asked softly. "From a karate blow?"

"Yes. When I saw all those diamonds, I . . ." He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and let it out with a sigh. "I was passing his room. The door was half-open and I could see him in there on the bed with a bottle in his hand. I thought it was just another case of a drunk leaving his door open, and I started to close it for him, but then I saw the diamonds, where he'd spread them out on the bed beside him."

I waited. When he didn't go on, I said, "Too much temptation?"

He nodded. "I knew it would be the only chance I'd ever have to be rich. I've always had to scrounge for every dime. It's been just one grubby little job after another all my life, and I . . . I don't know, I thought I could just take them, and who would ever know?"

"And then, Mr. Dobson?" I said.

"I put them in a leather bag that was there, and started to leave, but Lambert's head moved a little, and I . . . Like I said, I should never

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have learned karate. I didn't even think about hitting him; I just did. I was afraid he was coming to and that he'd see me and . . . You have to understand. It was suddenly like they were *my* diamonds, not his, and he was about to take them away from me."

"And you thought that by pushing him out the window you might cover up?"

"Yes. But I didn't think of that till later. Then I went back upstairs and did it."

He paused, breathing a little more slowly now, his voice a bit fainter. "All the rest was like you said, the lipstick and the phone call and all. It was all pretty clumsy, I guess. I was trying to divert suspicion, but I was so nervous and rattled and sick with my ulcer that I just . . ."

"Go on, Mr. Dobson," I said.

He turned his face away from me. "I've always been a fool," he said, almost inaudibly, and closed his eyes.

The ambulance was nearing the hospital. I sat watching the neon streak past through the window beyond Dobson's stretcher, suddenly tired to the bone. I didn't like the idea of leaving a man, Dobson or anyone else, under the impression he was going to die any longer than I had to.

"All right," I said to the intern beside me. "You can tell him the truth now."

The intern leaned forward, studying Dobson's face. Then he reached out and raised one of his eyelids.

"He didn't make it," he said. "He's dead."

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